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MA WEI SLOPE

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HANGING WATERS

THE HOUSE THAT CHAK BUILT

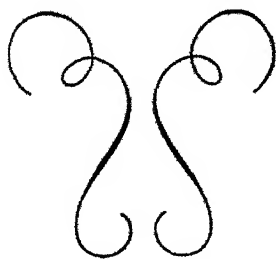
THE THREE BLOSSOMS OF CHANG-AN

Keith West



MA WEI SLOPE

*A Novel of the
T'ang Dynasty*



London

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With a new writing-brush and fresh ink, on paper which seems almost the Imperial yellow, I, Han Im, of the Palace at Chang-an, write this.

Hate, they have said, has no sons. Daughters tend Hate's tombs and set funeral bowls on the altar—daughters, whose names are not Hate's name and in whom, soon, Hate's very name dies. Yet, while they live, these daughters hate, too, in their withdrawn shoulders, their averted eyes, their long, straight, narrow lips. In little, they would be what their father was.

At Chang-an, in snow or summer, there in the Palace, and at the Palace's centre, the Emperor. Round him move guards and gardeners, slaves and favourites, men and half-men. At Chang-an, in snow, no beauty is so white as Yang Kuei-fei, the Favourite. In summer, no blossom nears her cheek's perfection. On painted fan, on pencilled bamboo, on chased stone, a thousand poems ape immortality to tell that she is unsurpassed. Since the great emperors of six hundred years ago, no love poems have been allowed to outlive their subject. Instead, men write now of Earth and Heaven, of travels and loneliness, and their poems are preserved. In the breath of the living, only, live the love songs which I no more can truly sing.

I write of what happens near me, making sons of my words, where my loins can never serve me. In these frettings of a paper surface I set my unruly offspring, to bring a sigh to later years or perhaps to curve in laughter the narrow, lovely lips of such as shall follow Mistress Yang Kuei-fei in the years that must be to come.

HAN IM.

At Chang-an.

Summer night, in the period of Small Heat.

I am a woman of a village which I shall not name. My given names are Winter Cherry, and the name of my family does not matter, for when once a girl has entered the palace of the Emperor, her name and her origin may be forgotten.

I am eighteen years old.

When I lived with my parents I was brought up to read and write, to know what was good poetry and what was not. On my father's estate I learned the elements of husbandry: in my father's house I learned to play the flute, to embroider silk, to weave and sew. All these learnings are now of no use to me, who must strive only to attend to those things which go to joy the Emperor, whom I have only seen at a distance. The Empress lives, unseen, in her own palace: only sometimes do we hear the shout of bearers as she goes, screened, to diminish boredom by movement.

Here, in the Palace Park, there are no men that are men, save the occasional poet whom the Emperor fancies for a quarter-of-an-hour walk and who is supposed, when in the Emperor's company, to be no more of a man than are the others, like Han Im, who organise and rule this world of girls.

Capricious, beautiful, willow amongst weeds, Mistress Yang Kuei-fei occupies and has long occupied the Emperor's time and thoughts. So it has been since she first came. No more does the Son of Heaven attend to matters of State: these are swept from his attention by her immediate presence.

Sometimes I see two swallows together, and envy them. Then I weep.

WINTER CHERRY.

Chang-an.

The Sixth Moon.

PART ONE

When Han Im came to her under the plane-tree, Winter Cherry sat on the soft turf grieving. Now, at the hour of the cock, under the fingers of a lengthening shadow, idly playing with the edge of her goosefeather fan, she wondered why, against the shadowed walls of the courtyard, she could conjure up no clearly-remembered face of her parents.

"The guard has been changed," Han Im told her in his high, fluting voice. "A new number of bowmen, fresh spearmen, pretend to protect us."

In the growing shade of the plane-tree it seemed to him that the strawberry colour of her garments merged into the old-gold of their trimming ribbon, and from the high windows of the Pepper Rooms one could hear the chatter of other girls, busied with their infinite futilities of adornment and gossip. He imagined their heads as empty drums of treble pitch, their eyes as little vacant windows to empty rooms. . . .

She sang softly; her thin face lifted:

My mother gave me grace to wear,

My father added what he could.

Alas: the gods have led me where

My life is just an attitude.

Then she stopped singing and looked at Han Im. He knew that she was feeling vaguely, as she admitted she always felt when she looked upon him, that his face and her father's had been cast in the same mould. The sober browns and greens of his silk skirt seemed almost grey in the shade of the plane-tree.

"You are always alone," he said as he stood looking down at her. She had dutifully risen to her feet, and his body cast a sound-shadow over her, so that the voices of the others in the Pepper

Rooms seemed suddenly an octave higher, like the sound of the big bats which would soon come out.

She replied: "You should know why I am always alone. You, too, value at their true worth the moments which succeed each other, the people who speak, the favours which come unasked. Have you, oh Han Im, altered your mind from what it last was? Under this very plane-tree you told me that you valued these things as a man values a grain of rice."

He said: "Sit down again. You have guessed rightly, for the Emperor desires your presence. Nevertheless, in answer to your last question, I have not changed my mind." He moved past her and rested his hand upon the bark of the tree.

"When?" she asked as she sat down. "It is early for such an invitation."

He laughed. The girls in the Pepper Rooms had begun to make the noises which denote a game or a quarrel.

"The dew descends upon the grass," he replied, "and serves as clock to the glowworm. If you, who care no grain of rice for an invitation which others in the aviary yonder would barter against their eyebrows, cannot so arrange the hour of your arrival as to space it between awkwardness and awkwardness, you are not whom I think." He took his hand from the tree as if to move away again. "I have duties," he reminded her, as if explanation were needed.

"I will use the glowworm's discretion," she answered. Then, as she stood up for his going, she said to his back: "Your speech grows every day more like my father's speech."

He did not turn round, but said over his shoulder: "They are by the Hwa Ching Pool."

She uselessly set a hair in place, powdered her knees and followed.

* * *

In the Imperial Park it seemed that bright butterflies hovered round the Flower-clear Pool. The colours of the flowers which were everywhere seemed dulled in comparison with the colour of men's garments. The glow of peonies yielded to scarlet silk. And all

this slowly turning, vibrating mass of colour centred round one man: all thoughts hinged on his thoughts, all actions hung on his actions. Every will was the Emperor's.

Yet, as she watched, she saw that there were two clusters, and (of the two) that round the Emperor showed less motion, less quickening of the living colour of *Rainbow Skirt and Feather Jacket*, than the group gathered, in the shelter of a hedge, round the prostrate figure of a man. The eunuch Han Im was there, directing others who, with advice and water equally, tried to bring consciousness to one quite willing to dispense with consciousness. It was under the influence of the water that he ultimately opened one eye, waved an uncertain hand and asked for solitude.

"Where am I?" he asked, when they had not gone.

One told him: "You are near the Hwa Ching Pool, and over there, in the Aloe Pavilion, sits the Emperor." Han Im added: "The Emperor has sent for you. He desires a poem."

Li Po closed his eyes again and lay down, a lean brown shadow under the bamboos. "Wine brings dreams of poems," he said. "It scares the words like birds from grain. Bring wine."

They fetched more water.

Winter Cherry came to them just as Li Po sat up again. She went down on her knees and dried his face with her sleeve. He opened his eyes wearily.

"Commands and kindness consort ill," he said. "This is no Emperor. Who are you, girl who are wiping my face?"

She told him. "I am called Winter Cherry, and you must come and write verses for the Emperor for, if you do not, his wrath will fall on all of us." She helped him to rise. One saw that dissipation had not wholly sapped his strength; though his legs were the narrow legs of one accustomed to riding horses.

One of the courtiers said in a reproving voice: "The philosopher Mencius told us that men's hands and women's hands should not meet."

Han Im brusquely replied: "Mencius also said that a general rule was to be broken in emergencies. Li Po, here, is an emergency." He took the poet's arm. Winter Cherry followed them both.

"I am coming," Li Po cried. "It is a duty which I owe to one who wiped my wet face with her sleeve." And suddenly he seemed not to be drunk at all, for he shook off Hsuan Im's supporting hand and walked steadily towards the Emperor. The attendants made way for him.

In the Aloe Pavilion the Emperor sat on a throne of ivory and red damask. Near him, a picture with yellow-tiled eaves and red upright pillars for frame, Yang Kuei-fei leaned on the rail. So she had leaned when Hsuan Tsung had first loved her. She had been brought up by her attendants out of the warm water of the pool, and love had come with her. Everybody knew this. Now she stood, in a long robe of deep blue, her hair high above her high forehead, her dark eyes empty, waiting for a word.

Yang Kuei-fei yawned behind her fan.

Li Po approached and bowed with difficulty in the Emperor's direction. "Your Majesty desires a poem," he said. "Your Majesty shall have a poem. But, at the risk of your displeasure and your favourite's surprise, I must attribute the authorship of this poem to Winter Cherry, here."

The Emperor demanded: "She wrote a poem?"

Li Po replied: "She inspired it. And to inspire a poem, in this world of imperfect people, is rarer than to write one."

"The girl has begun to interest me," the Emperor said. "Proceed."

Li Po turned. Winter Cherry held a skin fan which she had taken from an attendant, an ink block and a brush. She mixed the ink and gave the brush to Li Po.

He wrote on the skin of the fan, intoning as he wrote:—

*The gardener, who waters flowers,
Is paid his modest fee;
How rich a gardener whose powers
Include—to water me.*

*A single bronze chrysanthemum
Might well repay the care
She spends upon it, and may come
To glory—in her hair.*

*But does she judge a poet's worth
So far above her own
That she both wets and wipes the earth
Whereon the flower is grown?*

*Grass-green, Szechuan waters race,
Towards the high-sun sea,
But did the girl who dried my face
Think of my face, or me?*

*And when the water-clock shall woo
The hour when lovers meet,
I shall be waiting, like the dew,
In tears upon her feet.*

He handed back the writing materials, bowed low to the Emperor as he gave him the fan, and retired with too obvious dignity into a distant part of the park, where his green-and-white tiled pavilion could be seen between the trees. They all watched him go.

"He should have written that poem to me," Yang Kuei-fei said.

The Emperor muttered regretfully: "If he were not so exquisite a poet!"

But Winter Cherry did not seem to hear at all, for her heart went with Li Po, who had been kind to her.

* * *

It was much later, in the dark.

Han Im said: "You know that this is the custom, as surely as I know it to be the custom. Why, therefore, repine? It cannot, surely, be true that you do not desire the honour which the Son of Heaven is about to confer on you?" He held out the swansdown rug, helplessly.

Winter Cherry cried: "I do not want to go to him. Why should I want to go to him? What is there different . . ." Then she laughed through her tears. "You look foolish, holding the rug like that—much more foolish than I look. Why should I be carried to the Emperor in no more garments than a swansdown rug?"

Han Im answered: "Long ago, in the past, when it was feared that girls going to the Emperor might do him an injury, the custom grew up: with no more weapons than nature's nails, he is safe. Come: there is no use in crying, and the hour grows late."

"If you were not my friend," Winter Cherry said, "I would say that you are talking like an old woman."

Han Im said: "I am not very different from an old woman. If I were different, I should not be serving the Son of Heaven by doing what I am doing. And yet, would you not rather have me thus occupied, who remind you somewhat of your father, instead of Yen, who is fat and unsympathetic, or Ho, who is short and sharp and has hard hands, or Wen, whose tongue is like a file?"

He picked her up from her discarded clothes, wrapped her in the rug and bore her along the passage, through a curtained door and into a silent room where the Emperor sat, moodily playing with a jade fingering-piece. When the curtain fell behind her, Winter Cherry knew that she had come into a moment of time when men and events were larger than usual, when all the myriad small things of ordinary living gave place to concentrated reality, when she, a small thing without much of a history, crossed the path of something so much greater than herself that the future would chronicle the Emperor, would paint (on paper) facets of this man whom now she saw, almost motionless, thinking thoughts which she had not ever learned to think, a man whose word sent men on great errands or little, whose wish was death or life, whose glance saw more than another's stare. He looked tired as he sat there playing with the jade fingering-piece, his long fingers caressing its surface as (she supposed) they would soon caress her. . . . Han Im took the rug from her, and laid it over the back of a couch. The Emperor did not show any sign of having seen her.

Han Im said: "This is the girl who inspired Li Po this afternoon." Then he withdrew.

The Emperor said: "But I had summoned you for tonight before my favourite poet chose to immortalise you in a dedication." He turned and looked at her. "Stop shivering girl, and put that quilt round you. Do you realise that even I, the Emperor, am

powerless to alter these ancient customs? Do you imagine that, if I had my way, I should be denied the pleasure of stripping petals myself? Go to the next room, where you will find clothes. Put them on and return."

Winter Cherry, who had heard and disbelieved many tales of the Emperor's eccentricity, obeyed. When she came back, he was watching her. She saw amusement in his face, and blushed.

He laughed at her: "You have put on the clothes which Kuei-fei ordered to be made for my visit, ten years ago, to the village of Pa, to consult a magician who lived there." He made a gesture which itself, magically, took her to the crest of a hill overlooking the Yangtsz Gorge, spreading before her the limitless ranges of the land and the arrow of the river. "To see a magician, and now to see you!"

"I have not seen so many places as your Majesty," she replied, and added, "or so many summers."

He frowned. "The dignity of time has not yet bestowed on me the disabilities of time," he said. "Is that what you meant?"

"I mean nothing," she answered, fencing with the question, and starting to believe some of the tales of Imperial fancy. "But it is true," her honesty added.

"Listen," said the Emperor. "Since I took my place as the centre and hub of the world, I have been pursued by the inaccessible meanings of others. They hide their thoughts from me, who can tear from them every other concealment. But they are too stupid even to know what they mean. Again, I am hedged round by the customs and habits of the past. You are carried in to me naked in swansdown because the safety of some ancient emperor was imperilled. We are, today, surrounded by peonies in ugly pots because once, in remote history, an emperor decreed a feast of peonies on this day for the delight of himself and his mouldering favourite. The fact that you are here at all may be laid at the door of past emperors, and even I cannot break the custom."

Winter Cherry tried not to show that she had not expected a speech.

"Yes," she said.

"Yes, yes, yes!" he cried. "Always yes! Even Kuei-fei sometimes says 'yes' from habit. Sit down, girl. I will stand up: I speak better on my feet."

Winter Cherry replied: "I will listen carefully."

"There is no need for that," the Emperor said. "I will make the words as beautiful as I can. Do you write verse?" He got to his feet.

Her mind went back to all the men who had stood thus, talking to her unheeded. She remembered the men: she forgot what they had said. Men always talked thus, walking up and down, gesticulating, stringing words on words like bubbles in a stream, to break at last in a smooth pool of silence. And yet, these words were different. They were old, chosen words, whose meaning eluded immediate comprehension—not the ordinary conversation of a man who wants something of a girl, but the words of a man who does not care if he gains assent or no, since he feels his utterance too true to need even belief. Her listening broke into the middle of a sentence.

"... and even Kuei-fei, who founded her private team of actors—the Pear Tree Players—has not been able to make them leave the beaten track except by her own direction. It is tiring for ever to have to direct others, is it not?"

She said dutifully: "Yes. I do not know."

He stopped in his pacing. "You do not know. No man knows. And yet you have one virtue, at least—the virtue of not having heard me talk lengthily on my favourite topic. Kuei-fei has heard it all."

"She is wonderful," Winter Cherry said, meaning this.

The Emperor countered: "And now it is my turn to say 'yes', I suppose. And you do not wonder why she is not here?"

"No. You are master. Even Kuei-fei has to do what you command," she said.

He smiled, and the smile made him seem young.

"She is very accomplished," he agreed. "Whereas you—you have virtues and no accomplishments."

Winter Cherry murmured, doing justice to herself: "I can play

my own flute."

The Emperor touched a gong, and Han Im appeared.

"As you will have heard," the Emperor said, "we need flutes. Bring a basket full. One may resemble this flute of hers, which she says she can play."

Han Im bowed and withdrew. Winter Cherry thought that he must have been standing only just behind the curtained door. The room was bright with the top-heavy blooms of the peonies.

"They are beautiful," she said. "But they would be more beautiful if they had not been brought in from their gardens."

The Emperor looked up. His eyes were dark over darker half-circles, and she was instantly afraid.

He said: "The girls whom I summon here are usually too happy to criticise. You speak as though you thought. Do not think too deeply."

She had the courage to smile. "I have nothing to lose. Fear comes only from possession—courage from poverty."

"Who are you to speak of poverty?" he demanded, almost angrily. "Are you not clothed in silks, and fed on rich foods, sauced with the odours of a thousand rare and costly scents. . . ."

She replied: "These things are given me by others—by you. I do not own them, and so I do not fear their loss. I have only life to lose."

He cried: "Life may be lost in more ways than one. The life even of such as you may ebb slowly, painfully. . . ."

She bowed her head. "It is as you say. But, still, I should die at last. I think I could make myself die quickly."

He laughed. "This is indeed an unsuitable subject for our conversation," he said. "I have not yet seen enough Springs for me to be unmoved at the thought of your dying, in various unpleasant ways, before your eighteenth year. And you yourself, I think, are not wholly uninterested in the remainder of the years which shall be yours."

He ceased speaking, and sat down on a couch which creaked suddenly in the silence. Far away in the night, laughter and a lute blended.

"How absurd—how unlikely it is for me to be thus urging you to live!" the Emperor went on again. "Have I not tens—nay, hundreds of lives at my behest? Why should I trouble over yours? But you have only yourself to thank, since you began thus. Come, there are better occupations than bandying words on a summer's evening while we wait for flutes. I could send for Li Po, who can throw off rhymes like water from a swimmer's hair. If Kuei-fei were here, I should not lack entertainment."

She said: "Li Po is a famous poet, and Li Po has no fear of you because no other than he can carve such poems. The Lady Yang, your favourite, has nothing to fear while she is your favourite. But I . . . I can only play my flute, and there are many flute-players."

"Li Po does not need a flute," he answered, as Han Im returned with a basket. "He can delight with no other instrument than his tongue."

As she took out flutes from the basket and felt their fingering, she replied: "Li Po is a man. Besides, even he wrote about flutes, instead of playing them. Do you remember?"

"Tell me," he commanded.

While she searched, she recited:

*By the evening sedges I heard a distant flute;
Cutting a hollow branch, I played in reply.
Now the nightingales' number is greater by two;
They understand the songs of their unknown singers.*

The Emperor was silent, sitting now with his eyelids closed. He seemed tired. Winter Cherry tried several of the flutes and, finding one whose fingering was like that of her own, began to play an old song, reciting the lines after the music.

*The lilies bend towards the South
Whither my heart has fled:
A bowl of rice may fill my mouth,
But what can fill my bed?
I can but weep instead.*

*The lilies bend towards the North
Before the rising breeze:
What conquest is a widow worth
Who pays an Empire's fees
In taxes such as these?*

*The lilies bend now here, now there,
As battling armies sway:
But I have still a heart to share
Though none to give away
If we should lose the day.*

*The lilies do not move at all:
The air is soft and still:
I let my window-curtains fall
Across the window-sill
And lie and weep my fill.*

When she had done, the Emperor asked (since any cultured man is bound to pay at least that tribute to Art): "Who was the author, and what the subject?"

Winter Cherry replied: "It was written by Mang I-hiu, at the time of the Warring States, and it is a lonely wife's lament for her husband, who has gone to fight the Huns on the frontier."

He observed: "The Huns come from the North, and I observe that *her heart fled* in the other direction."

Winter Cherry smiled quietly: "Her heart went South for the sake of the rhyme, I suppose. Any poet would act thus, for the beauty of the poem is far more important than the correct points of the compass. Shall I sing you another?"

"No," said the Emperor. "Come here."

* * *

"You think of me as if I were an old man," the Emperor said. "Do not be misled by years: do not let these creases in my skin, creases which do not magically disappear in the clear, smooth surface of youth when I unbend them, delude you into believing me incapable of arousing in you those feelings which now,

apparently, you fear to have roused."

Winter Cherry replied: "I am afraid. Outside, in the world, these feelings arise without deliberation: they sweep a girl with them, and she has not to think too much of the mere mechanism of their arousal. With you, there is something of the inevitability of fate. I know that I shall do and be what you expect me to do and be. There will be no chance to run away and hide, laughing, in a garden, until the awkward memory passes. Like men making a road, you will pass inexorably to your intended purpose. . . ."

He said: "You use long words. I am not accustomed to having my motives and technique analysed by a girl. Not that I would have you think that many of my girls are given the chance thus to talk to and of me: I am accustomed to send them away as soon as possible and return to the remembered, familiar ground of my favourite, the Mistress Yang Kuei-fei. But she is indisposed, and thus I am inclined to listen to your prattle."

Winter Cherry softly sang the *siu sing*:

*Four stars hung in the darkened East:
From dusk to dawn he let us stay,
Nor did we dare to say
Love mattered least.*

*The Pleiades, Orion, shone,
And when we came he did not heed
The sheets that lovers need
To lie upon.*

He laughed: "That was written in the time of King Wan, which is a very long time ago. But it is interesting to see that the Emperor, then, did not have the girls in singly. The modern habit seems to me to be wiser, for who would have all the courses of a dinner set before him at once?"

Winter Cherry cried indignantly: "It is wrong to speak of me as if I were a piece of food!"

The Emperor replied: "What can the word 'wrong' mean to me? But you are right: you are not in the least like a piece of food.

Rather you resemble a cool drink, which a man can feel descending his throat. Or, better still, something which combines food and drink—say a melon. You are very like a melon, when I look at you. Several melons.”

“My name is Winter Cherry,” she reminded him, though her teeth were chattering a little, and for one unbearable moment he seemed to her to epitomise all ancient, leering privilege, with his lined face desiring her, and his long, thin fingers with the thumb-nails encased in gold sheaths. Then it seemed to her as if in her inmost soul the string of a lute had snapped, and she began to cry.

* * *

Han Im, yawning behind the curtain, became aware that the sound from the room beyond was undoubtedly the breathing of a man asleep. He reflected for a while on the strange fact that the immobility of sleep, which should protect from notice and so from attack, is outweighed by a rhythmic snore. He wondered if animals snored as often, or as obviously, as men. Then he heard the rustle of Lady Yang's borrowed silks, and saw a faint swaying of the curtain as Winter Cherry opened the lattice and stepped out. He went along a passage, wakened the other eunuch, Yen, and went out across the Park.

Winter Cherry's figure was hard to see, at first. Then, as his eyes became accustomed to the dark (for it was the hour of the Ox) he noticed a movement against the painted trees, and saw that she was making for the Porcelain Pavilion, where Li Po sought relief from official poetry in outbursts of reality.

There were lights in the Pavilion, but no voices, and as Han Im came up and crossed Flying Tiger Bridge, Winter Cherry slipped through the open door and so came to the room where Li Po was sleeping. No sound disturbed the silence of this room, where one lamp burned at the foot of a couch. The poet slept on his left side, with his face to the wall.

She hesitated, then looked round her, at the sleeping poet, at the wine jar, at the camphor-wood box in which, everybody said, Li Po kept the poems which he wrote. Then she turned, as

if to go out, and Han Im realised that by being asleep, Li Po had spared himself a man's duty of comforting a woman. And this seemed to Han Im an unwarranted escape. So he coughed.

The girl stopped in her tracks at the sound and turned. Li Po groaned and sat up. They looked at each other.

Li Po said: "It was not you who coughed."

Han Im stepped into the room and bowed politely. "The cough was mine," he said. "If one so unimportant as myself may be admitted to have influenced the course of history, it was I who coughed. The girl here, Winter Cherry, was about to leave, seeing you (as she thought) sleeping, and I knew that discourtesy would be the last thing which you would desire."

Li Po observed: "I was not asleep. I heard her enter."

Winter Cherry cried: "Things happen which are not of my doing. I meant to go, taking my sorrow with me. Now I seem as foolish as I am, for I did not know that Han Im, here, was following me, nor that you, sir, were awake. Thus I am made to appear stupid, which I did not wish to be." She turned away again towards the door.

The poet clapped his hands. Nothing happened.

"My servants are asleep," he cried. "But since they have no such cause as I for sleep, they must be awakened. And yet—movement seems to cut my head into two parts, slowly and painfully. I wonder if the Emperor would value, as an addition to the official list of tortures, that of enforced movement after a surfeit of wine. I must ask him." He rose to his feet and went out.

Han Im said: "It is my duty not to leave you."

She replied: "If one cannot be alone, it matters little who may be the company." Then she smiled: "I am sorry. That was not what I would have said."

Li Po came in again. He bore a jug of water, and his face was wet. "The worst moments have passed," he said. "Now, hunger is a powerful irritant of sorrow, and (since my servants are unutterably lazy) I know that in my eating-room, through that door, will be the not unsubstantial remains of tonight's feast. 'Last night's orgy', would probably be more accurate. Come, girl, and you,

Han Im."

"I am not hungry," Winter Cherry said, following the men.

Li Po said over his shoulder: "Repeat that, if you can, when a few sauces have urged your stomach."

The room into which they came bore, indeed, every sign of having witnessed a party of several people. On the round, central table not even had the bowls been piled. Dried melon-seeds in little saucers showed by their disarray that the meal had, in the usual way, been finished with conversation. On the long table at the side of the room uneaten food remained. The chicken soup had globules of congealed grease on its surface: the noodles recalled the tired roots of convolvulus: a solitary piece of fried duckskin still looked almost appetising.

"You may eat, or cook and eat," Li Po said. "Here is a small stove for the table, sent to me by the Governor of Kwei Sek, charcoal, tinder and flint. Cooking vessels in the kitchen, I think."

Winter Cherry said: "Your servants are very remiss. But this is to our advantage." Then she busied herself with forgotten arts.

Han Im took the poet out on to the verandah and they went to stand on Flying Tiger Bridge.

"Life," Han Im observed, moving his head in the direction of the sounds of Winter Cherry's activities.

"Or death," Li Po replied. "We all wait for death, even if we do not know that we are waiting. All this is temporary stuff. Only Chung-nan mountain, fifteen miles over there, where you cannot see it, is eternal. We three shall moulder; the palace, the capital, Chang-an itself, shall pass. Only the eternal mountain shall watch our passing, and the passing of our thoughts. Or is that but a poet's fancy?"

"The girl has not wept yet," Han Im said. "It would be good for her to weep. The Emperor's pleasantries are best thus washed out."

Li Po struck the porcelain balustrade of the bridge with the palm of his hand. "You and I," he said, "know these truths. She will learn these truths. Han Im, I am weary of this life for a little. So are you. So must she be."

Han Im agreed. "Yes."

A little later Winter Cherry called them. She had warmed what food was warmable, had boiled fresh rice and put clean bowls and chopsticks.

"You were right about hunger," she said to Li Po.

Han Im put a saucer of melon-seeds handy, and sat down with the poet. The two men split melon-seeds delicately between front teeth, watching the girl eat.

Li Po said: "Whatever I said about hunger—and I have forgotten what I said—the truth is this: food in freedom tastes like imagined food on the terraces of the gods in the illimitable red clouds of sunset, whereas food eaten under constraint, however well it be cooked, turns in the mouth to strings and balls of undigested matter. It is, I suppose, something to do with the saliva. Wang Wei would know, for he is a physician. But he is not here. What do you say, Han Im?"

The eunuch observed: "There are freedom and freedom. And some of us can never be wholly free. To Winter Cherry, who has before her all forms of freedom, the constraint of the Emperor's palace doubtless clouds all her mind. To you, who have the freedom of words and who add to that the freedom of wine, the freedom to be self-supporting looms small. To me, who lack the most conspicuous of man's freedom, all food tastes the same."

"This duckskin," Winter Cherry said, thoughtfully, "is better than many words. All that you say is true, and doubtless it is satisfying for a man thus to have all truths set in the black and white of words, yet for me there are unshed tears between my eyes and my food."

Li Po said: "Let us leave her."

Outside again, on the bridge, Han Im observed: "The Master told us that bad government is worse than a tiger. I look round and see the Empire failing. The Huns are inadequately held in the Northern frontiers: official business is neglected for the curve of a fair girl's eyebrow. An Lu-shan has gathered his men and rebellion stands just the other side of T'ung Kuan Pass. Nightly, they say, the Emperor watches from his Calyx Tower for the chain of living lights which beacon to him over the miles the safety of that Pass. I have often thought with pleasure of death, and refrained only for her sake."

He nodded towards the Pavilion. "I feel in a way responsible for her, since she says that she finds my features and my habits like those of her father. A paradox, that! Oh to go away, where man finds herbs for food, when the rain of evening and the sun of midday encourage the fruits of nature, where there is no temporising with an Emperor or a conscience! On the slopes of Chung-nan . . ." He hummed an old song under his breath, then went on: "We could take the girl."

Li Po picked up a yellow pebble from the path and dropped it into the water. "The eddies report, long after, that the pebble was dropped," he said. "Yes, let us drop a pebble. Do they know that she is here? Or you?"

"No one knows as yet, but time is short," Han Im replied. "Tomorrow, or full sun, will be too late. Have you a carriage and a reliable driver? She can cut her hair and dress as a boy dresses. And I have no money with me."

"Let us be practical for once," Li Po agreed. "You cut her hair and burn the pieces you have cut. I will first bring clothes for her and then will waken my driver." Then he made the gesture of one who has just remembered something. "Of course! My nephew will do. I forgot that he was on a visit here. I had been keeping him out of the way of the Lady Yang. He drives a carriage and he has spare clothes for the girl. What could be better?"

Han Im agreed, and they went into the Pavilion, towards the sounds of two voices.

* * *

"My family name is Kuen, and my given names Ah Lai," one voice was saying. "I am a man of Lung Pui, and am on a visit to my uncle here, the honourable poet Li Po. My age is nineteen years. My mother was his sister."

Winter Cherry replied: "It would be of no avail for me to tell you my family name. My given names are Winter Cherry. I have seen not more than eighteen years. I am a girl in the palace of the Emperor, Hsuan Tsung, so you may as well put me out of your head."

Ah Lai answered: "To ask me to put you out of my head is to

ask an impossibility. Who are Emperors, that they should have you? No. I have tried in the past, like my uncle, to write poetry; I have learned the Four Books from end to end and read the other classics, but now I find myself tongue-tied, like a fish in a golden bowl that has not learned to speak, now that I have seen you. My lips seem gummed with gum from the southern provinces, my tongue adheres to the roof of my mouth, my eyes dumbly behold what my hands are too paralysed to grasp, and you ask me to put you out of my head!"

"It is not very good gum," Winter Cherry laughed. Then the two men coughed and entered.

Li Po said: "If you wish to serve this lady, my nephew, serve her now, as we tell you. Fetch a set of your clothes and put them at her disposal. Aid her to cut off her hair and destroy the cuttings. Then get the carriage ready, for we four shall go to Chung-nan Mountain, fleeing from the haunts of men, and speed is our greatest need if we are to avoid being followed."

Ah Lai replied: "I do not ask why you tell me this. Does a man ask of a peach-tree why its fruit are golden suns of delight? No. But if you wish to avoid following, we must walk. Carriages make a rumbling, and carriages leave wheel-tracks and much gossip amongst those who see them. But if four men walk on a road, it is afterwards as if they had not passed. Take thick shoes, for the mountain is, I believe, a full fifteen miles, and that only a fair road."

Winter Cherry observed: "I cannot avoid seeing that you are thinking of doing all this for me, who am a very ordinary person, and quite unworthy of all this planning."

"To say what is expected of you," Li Po told her, "is only one side of your character. If the judgment of my friend Han Im here is sound, there is more than mere convention behind your eyes. Come—action. They say that poets cannot act. Observe, then! Han Im, you and I will collect a few necessities. Ah Lai, while we have gone, will do for the girl what must needs be done for the girl. Come."

They went out. Ah Lai went out by a different door and returned quickly with clothes and scissors. As he made to leave, Winter Cherry stopped him.

"You need not be so careful for my blushes," she said. "I am a girl of the Emperor's . . ."

"Were," Ah Lai corrected her.

"Was," she admitted. "I am not like girls who turn the colour of peonies when a man sees them. First cut my hair like a boy's. We shall not burn the hair, as they suggested, for that would be unlucky. I shall take it with me and bury it beside the road. Cut quickly. Here."

Ah Lai, between delight and diffidence, bungled his way through his unaccustomed task.

Outside the room, the poet Li Po and the eunuch Han Im looked at each other enquiringly and then, together, broke into laughter.

"We risk our necks, our comfort and our own respect," Li Po said, "for the sake of a girl."

"You have more to risk than I," Han Im replied with the mock-bitterness which he felt that he should like to adopt. "But, seriously, even if matters had not thus come to a feminine head, I was beginning to find things intolerable. You remember that the Master said that if you could not alter a bad government, the only solution was to go away. And you know, as well as I, that here we have infatuation with a lady upsetting all the routine of rule, that the ever-present threat from the Northern borders needs but a signal to move South, and that An Lu-shan, son of a beaten Hun, whom the Emperor favoured and the Lady Yang adopted, requites their kindness by projected rebellion. If we stay, we risk death: if we go, we risk death. Let us go."

"Yes," agreed the poet, "that is almost exactly what you said a minute or two past. It gains, of course, by repetition. So let us collect such things as are essential. The boy is right about walking, instead of riding."

"Your poems, in the chest?" Yan Im asked.

"Hsuan Tsung favours literature," Li Po replied. "They will be safe with him, however his rage may bubble. I must find you a few ounces of silver."

They put a few things into a black, shiny case.

"I have nothing else," Li Po said.

In the room where Ah Lai was helping Winter Cherry to button clothes on the wrong side, she was saying much the same.

"I have nothing to take with me save this flute, and that is not mine. You—you have all the reputation of your honoured family, a reputation which your uncle has built higher. You have scholarship and the hope of more scholarship. One day you will have many sons to whom, in quiet confidence, you may leave the tending of your tombs. It is wrong that you should endanger all this for me, who am so small a thing in the eyes of the world."

"The button-hole is a finger's width lower," he replied. "Here—let me do it. And so you think that I, who have only now balanced the world's judgment against my own, shall be diverted from my intention? And this button here. So. One day I shall reverse the process." Then, as tears gathered: "Be still! How can I button you if you shiver?"

Shortly the other two came into the room. Winter Cherry picked up her flute and Ah Lai thrust some things in a bundle.

"Paper—for writing," he said as he tied it up. "There will be leisure."

Then the four went out under the dim light of an impending dawn, through a private gate in the Imperial Gardens and so south. Li Po dropped the key of the gate into a stream as they passed.

"I would not wish others to use that gate," he said.

As they rounded the walls and skirted the city, it was possible to see, ahead of them, the great mass of Chung-nan amidst its fellow hills.

* * *

"I have written," said Li Po, as they plodded along the unending road, "much about travel. I have written of journeys and of meetings, I have praised the workman about his task and the scholar about his administration, I have sung of the delicate feet of girls (often, I confess, for the sake of an elusive rhyme) and only now do I begin to realise what this common means of human progression really implies in effort and discomfort. Such arches as my feet once had seem now to have collapsed like a broken buttress in dust and chaos, the muscles behind my knees ache like the jaw of a taciturn

man who has been compelled to narrate to the magistrate the tales of his wife's short-comings, and now it would appear that I have a stone in my shoe."

Han Im said: "To laugh at oneself is to admit to cosmic insignificance. It is therefore that I venture to be reminded of certain beasts of burden which may be seen bearing their loads of merchandise into the cities of the North. They sway, these camels, like ships with ballast ill-secured, their pace seems at once slow and hurried, ungainly and yet untiring, and there is but one characteristic which (it seems to me) I fail ignominiously to share with them, since the gods have provided them with a store against thirst which I most conspicuously lack."

When it was apparent that the two elder men had nothing more immediately to say, Winter Cherry observed: "I used to walk much when I was a child or, playing, run without thought for distances greater than I now walk in discomfort. But, since I became . . ." she hesitated, and then went on—"since I was brought to Chang-an, I have ridden and been carried until my feet seem to have lost both their muscles and their hardness of sole. Nevertheless, I am not unhappy now, for it seems that with every step that I urge myself, something returns of me that has been missing for a while."

Ah Lai had eyes for no one but the girl, and had been unusually silent hitherto. Yet he could not resist saying: "That is why I advised you to wear thick soles."

"*There is a glade with water here,*" Li Po observed, halting at a slight turn of the road. "*The girl has cakes which we can eat.*" His voice had the high chanting note of poetry.

Han Im added a third line: "*The water, like our need, is clear.*"

They looked at each other then, laughing, Ah Lai tried: "*To urge our jaws will ease our feet.*"

Li Po said: "Clumsy. Let the girl say."

Winter Cherry volunteered, after a moment: "*A well-fed army scorns retreat.*"

Han Im said: "It does not sound good enough. It lacks the master's touch. For myself, I think the rhyme should be 'meet'."

Then they all looked at Li Po. He smiled, picked up the black

case which Han Im had set down at their halting, and walked down in the direction which he had indicated, saying as he went: "Your third line, Han Im, has the form of a fourth line, and therefore to add a fourth to it is impossible. But your choice for the last rhyme is good. Suppose we say '*Desire and appetite shall meet*', and then look for a third line. Perhaps it might be '*If life and living be austere*', or '*If pedantry can disappear*'. The first means little, the second less. I will think about it. Here is the place—the spring, fresh grass, a fallen tree for a seat and the birds overhead. What more could be necessary?" He took the cake which Winter Cherry held out to him. "Would you care, Han Im, to analyse that unfinished verse?"

Han Im replied: "It may be all summed up in a word. Thus:

*Spring's in the glade:
The girl has cakes:
I taste the maid
In what she makes."*

They applauded. Winter Cherry said: "You are not as hungry as that, I hope?"

Ah Lai mumbled with his mouth full: "It is I who shall have the eating of that particular cake."

Winter Cherry, drinking from her hands at the spring, observed: "I have learned not to blush." She went to bury her hair at the foot of a bank.

Then they all returned to the road and walked on, between the high trees, southwards. They went on their way up the now slowly-sloping path, between fir and forest trees increasingly unlike those of the plain which they were leaving, trees which forsook the seeming neatness of city gardens for the purposive aspiring of untrammelled growth; ahead of them the great coloured mass of the mountain hung imperially in the southern sky, a beacon, a goal, and an unattained desire. On the lower shoulder of the mountain a cluster of rough roofs, tile and straw impartially, showed where the road ran.

"That is the place," Li Po told them.

"It may seem strange to you two younger ones," Han Im said, "to find thus, on the shoulder of a mountain, an almost village devoted largely to the delight, entertainment and relaxation of poets. I have found in the past that poets are apt to take for granted the comforts and facilities which earlier rulers have provided for them. The place before us, for example, was built and furnished by the Empress Wu-chao, who seized the throne nine years before Li Po was born. During her reign and that of the two Emperors who preceded our present monarch, the collection of houses which you now see coming towards you out of their green foliage was built and enlarged as a place where the poets of the capital, exhausted by dissipation or even by making poems to order, could come for resting. The larger building is called 'The Poet's House', and below it you can see the palm thatched farm house whose produce and (I add) cooks make life here a dream of laziness. Here Meng Hao-jen used to come, and of it he wrote his famous 'On Returning to Chung-nan Hill'. You remember it, Li Po?"

"Why ask me to remember other men's poems?" Li Po complained.

Winter Cherry said: "You tell us, Han Im."

Han Im recited:—

*I shall offer no more petitions at the north gate.
Here, in my Chung-nan hovel
I am disgraced through the Emperor's wisdom.
Ill, unvisited, weakening,
My hair bleaches like winter sunbeams.
I lie in the moonlight beneath the pine-trees,
Thinking how empty is my window.*

"That is a very sad poem," Ah Lai said. "Did he die here?"

Han Im answered: "I do not know. But the Emperor denied that Meng had been sent away. Li Po, did you not contribute to that?"

"Yes," Li Po said. "I did. A most inadequate thing called 'A Message to Meng Hao-jen'. Not only do I forget it, but I should be unwilling to tell it to you, even if I did remember. But it appears to me that we shall not find this place empty, as we had expected, for I

see more than signs of life. And, unless my eyes are very faulty, that is Wang Wei himself, making preparations to welcome us."

"But he is nearly as famous as yourself," Ah Lai said.

"What is fame?" Li Po asked. "Of Wang Wei I can only tell you that he is first and foremost a fisherman, then that his powers as a doctor are in demand whenever he can be persuaded to exercise them, that he is a devotee of Buddha, and that his poetry is indescribable. He will tell you some, if you pretend that you have allowed it to escape your memory. But now, as we are near them, we must go in order."

So they formed a procession, and at the gate which led in to the tended stone-pathed garden of the house Wang Wei stood to receive them, hands in his wide sleeves. On the left of but slightly behind Wang Wei another figure bowed—a man of perhaps thirty, slight and (so Winter Cherry felt) a little sinister.

"Greetings indeed!" Wang Wei cried when they had reached the prescribed distance. "I had not dreamed of your coming to visit us. This is Liu Shen-hsu, who also spoils paper with verse. You have not yet eaten your morning rice?"

"Your surprise at seeing us is nothing to our delight in seeing you," Li Po replied. "We came here on the strength of a whim, ready to find the house empty, prepared to make do for ourselves. Now we find company such as no guess could have expected: we find friends and servants, warmth and welcome. Indeed, I can hardly bear to think of my own feelings if we had walked so far and not encountered you. This is Han Im," he concluded.

They broke up into groups. Wang Wei and Li Po went to look at the flowers. Liu and Han Im discussed the weather.

Winter Cherry said to Ah Lai: "We had better put the things somewhere. I do not know what tale they will tell our hosts, and it would be as well to hide any evidence which might conflict with that tale."

"I will show you," Ah Lai answered. "I have been here before. But remember you are supposed to be a boy, and do not be too polite when they speak to you. Come."

As they moved towards the building, Li Po called from the

garden: "Ah Lai, you two can have the room which you occupied when we were here last time." Then he turned to the flowers.

Ah Lai said: "My uncle, being a poet, is not what most men would call a practical man, but on this occasion I have no fault to find with his arrangements."

When they reached the low-ceilinged room, they found that the long bed against the north wall was occupied by two girls who had removed their outer garments and were lying on their backs at opposite ends, eating melon-seeds.

Ah Lai put down the things which he was carrying. "You have made a mistake," he said. "This room is ours."

One of the girls turned to look at him, and laughed. "You can see for yourself that what you have said is untrue," she told him. "This is our room. I am called Honeysuckle, and my sister, here, is Clear Rain. We have come to add sparkle to the verbal wisdom of the old men, and the honourable Wang Wei gave us this room. Nevertheless . . ."

Clear Rain spoke without turning. "I imagine that you knew the room to be ours," she said. "Your coming therefore bears another possible interpretation. But it is too early in the day. So go away."

Ah Lai said: "You are both wrong. First, this is not your room, but ours. Secondly, we did not come to see you. I shall consult the honourable Li Po and tell him about you."

Both the girls sat up at once. "Li Po is here?" Honeysuckle asked. "Then indeed it will be worth while having come. Wang Wei is old and knows it, Liu Shen-hsu is not old, but thinks that he is. Li Po, alone, possesses the wisdom of age and the abilities of youth. Come, Clear Rain, let us go and find him."

They ran towards the door, then stopped and put on the rest of their clothes before disappearing with much chatter.

Ah Lai observed: "My uncle seems to have a reputation. Now that the girls have gone, we can leave our things here. We had better go and see him, and the honourable Wang Wei, since it seems the two of them are at cross purposes."

But when they reached the garden, the difficulties seemed to

have been resolved, for the girls were laughing and joking with Li Po, while Wang Wei looked on benevolently. The younger poet, Liu Shen-hsu, came towards them.

"It seems that there has been trouble over accommodation," he said. "Though why two youths such as yourself should object to the presence of two such accomplished girls as Honeysuckle and Clear Rain, I cannot imagine. It must be the first time that those two have met with such an affront. But the honourable Wang Wei has said that you are to have the girls' room and the girls can have the next room." He looked enquiringly at Winter Cherry and Ah Lai, as if he held doubts which he did not voice. Then he added: "There will be a meal in a short time."

Ah Lai said: "That is only right. I and my friend will go and wash off the dust of travel. We shall look forward to seeing you again."

Winter Cherry did not speak until they had reached the room. Then she arranged her things and said: "Ah Lai, you have hinted much of what you expect from me. But do not expect what it is not right to expect. I belong to the Emperor, and even if I have run away from the Emperor, I do not mean to give myself to anyone else. Let us be clear on that."

Ah Lai replied: "My uncle says that I have the confidence of my youth. I know that, when we were at Chang-an, in the Porcelain Pavilion, he kept my presence secret, lest the Lady Yang Kuei-fei, who is said to have a fierce eye for men of my age, should hear of me and make trouble. How different are women! She has to be kept from me, and you tell me to expect nothing. Well, what will be, will be, and . . ."

She interrupted: "It is only last night since I was with the Emperor."

"*When a woman speaks to you, smile but do not listen,*" he quoted from the ancient Li-kin. Then they washed and went out again, and Winter Cherry knew that she felt uneasy. It was strange that men never realised what girls thought or felt, and that Ah Lai took no more seeming note of last night than he did of her warning.

The garden, bright with tended flowers under the sun, stretched

behind the house, up the slope. All the others were now grouped, talking, while servants from the house were setting out a round table for the morning meal.

When they had leisurely taken their places, Wang Wei said: "I think that you will quite understand how, in view of the fact that my medical abilities are occasionally in demand amongst such as are unwise enough to desire to defer death, I have ventured to prescribe a morning meal. There are two aspects of this which must be considered—the meal and its eaters. In taking the second first, I am of course pandering to that interest in himself which is natural to man, and in doing so I shall subdivide my subject into the groups of those who, exercised and anxious, await their meal, and those who, with appetites jaded by surfeit and by a method of life which cannot medically commend itself to me, spur food down their unworthy throats in anticipation of some new and perhaps justificatory flavour."

Ah Lai observed to Winter Cherry: "Hunger grows with air."

Wang Wei continued: "The food must be both nourishing and appetising. The edge, therefore, shall be taken from your need by a mere preface of chicken broth with previously fried snails and nuts—strange but effective." He waved a hand and the servants brought in a steaming dish. "Do me the favour of tasting it. It was, you will remember, said of the Master that *he was never without ginger when he ate*. Ginger, therefore, in fact, shall be the foundation of our second dish. It shall be not only the foundation, but the full limit and extent of that dish. In fact, ginger from jars of Kiang-su porcelain (for clothes enhance the beauty of a girl and a coffin shows the riches of the relatives of the departed) shall be brought to you when you are ready."

Li Po said, smiling: "I am reminded of the old poem about the morning meal."

Liu objected: "I have written a much better one."

Wang Wei said: "The first thought is always the fresher. Let us have yours, Tai Po." Thus, using Li Po's social title, he recalled to the younger man that he was younger.

Clear Rain, smiling at Li Po, sang in a rounded voice:

*The morning meal depends
Upon the night before;
Did you dine out with friends
And hunt your pleasure, or
At home, within your door,
Write 'habit' to your score?*

Han Im said: "These expensive little pets know everything which they can use for our discomfiture, Liu. After that classic example of Li Po's, can you bear to favour us with your own poem?"

"I heard it when I last ate ginger in Kiang-su," Honeysuckle said. "It goes:

*The skies are clouded, and in my head
The Emperor's proud cavalry make their battleground.
Alas, these gongs do not sound 'Retreat'.
It is sad that for a night's pleasure
I should sacrifice my morning meal."*

They praised the poem, and spoke of smaller things until the jars of ginger were brought in.

"Preserved in honey," Wang Wei told them. "It is to be followed by a quite ordinary main dish of rice, chicken, bamboo-shoots and lichen, on which will be laid the foundation of the day's energies. And now, to formalities. It is only fitting that we should thus welcome our friends the honourable Li Po, the eunuch Han Im, and these two youths whose names I did not catch. It is in the highest degree fortunate that our own stay should have overlapped theirs by one day, for we intend, as you know, to leave tomorrow for the west, away from the rumours of disorders and war which trickle from the Capital source to this, our rural backwater."

Li Po yawned and rose to his feet. "All that you have so excellently said, we echo," he observed. "And (since here profound effort seems out of place) I need go no further than the first chapter of the Master's words to remind you that it is pleasant to have friends coming from distant places and it is equally delightful to be those friends. I would ask you to spare me the need for further felici-

tations, since I find that the sequence of Indulgence, Hunger and again Indulgence has led to an unconscionable onset of indigestion. I therefore thank you again, and sit down."

Wang Wei hastened to prescribe a drug from his collection and, when Li Po felt better, the meal proceeded to its end.

The hour of the serpent had just given place to the hour of the horse, and over the bright colours of the garden the silent climax of midday was growing. Liu Shen-hsu caught up with Winter Cherry as she went back to the house, and steered her along a path leading through low shrubs towards a half-moon clearing on the edge of the woods.

"It is useless," he told her when she had unwillingly sat down to listen, "to continue with this pretence of being a boy. No—do not speak yet. Any man such as myself, with experience of the world, could see at once that your clothes were buttoned on the wrong side. To such a man as I, who lives for the poetry of movement, every gesture is a betrayal of the truth. I do not know who you are, or why you thus masquerade, but the fact that you came with the eunuch, Han Im, and the dissolute poet, Li Po, suggests a puzzle whose key lies in the palace at Chang-an."

Winter Cherry knew that he was not certain of her sex, and judged that he did not dare to put his theory to the test, preferring rather to let her betray herself. So she said: "You remember the song of Mu-lan? She went to fight the Tatars in place of her father, and for twelve years served in the army. Then, when she finally came home, her fellow-soldiers were surprised to find her to be a girl. The song ends, you know:

*For twelve years they had not guessed,
Had never thought her a girl.
For a male hare gallops
And a female hare starts at a sound,
But if they run together
No man can swear which is which.*

So your wild guess amuses me, and will amuse my friend Ah Lai."

He smiled. "A better thing," he said, "will be to put you in the

same room as Honeysuckle and Clear Rain, and let them discover. I am prepared to bide by their opinion."

Winter Cherry got up and started to walk back to the house. As she went she said over her shoulder: "Now of Han Im you could not be sure."

Ah Lai was waiting for her. "Where have you been?" he asked. "I have looked everywhere for you. Tonight there will be a difficulty, for if you sleep with me, or with the girls, your secret is sure to come out."

She told him of Liu's words. "I think that he guesses, but is not sure," she said. "And why, if I sleep in the same room as yourself, should my secret come out?"

Ah Lai replied to the first part only: "I will manage Liu. He will not trouble you." With that she had to be content.

Han Im came to see her shortly after the sun had begun to fall.

"I am worried," he said. "We so gaily started on this expedition, unthinking of the difficulties which would ensure. Now these difficulties pile up against us. Liu suspects. Li Po, it is true, does not care. Wang Wei is doubtful, for physicians, even if they only practice occasionally, are skilled in recognising those instinctive movements which make it possible to distinguish between a man and a woman. Last night I did not care if danger lay in our plan. Today, in the full light of the sun, I remember only too clearly the ways in which an angry emperor, an old, angry emperor, may bar for a while the denied gateway between life and death, while he joys in the suffering of one whom he believes he is thus punishing. For you I have, as you know, an almost paternal feeling, but even that cannot compensate me for a possibly unendurable death."

Winter Cherry sat down on the bed and made room for Han Im beside her. She said: "I would that all of you would think less of possible trouble. I, who have most to lose if I am discovered, seem least fearful. You worry about discovery—Li Po worries about having to be respectable because Wang Wei is here. Wang Wei worries because he is not sure of me, and Liu worries because he wants to be sure of me. The two chattering girls worry because tomorrow they will have to go elsewhere, and Ah

Lai worries because he is afraid of everybody's guesses. Alas, I might as well be in the Pepper Rooms at Chang-an."

Han Im did not comment on what he felt to be ingratitude, and shortly she was left alone. The day bore on through the hours of the goat and the monkey, and the time of Wang Wei's feast came nearer. Winter Cherry knew how, with wine, man's nature sloughs convention, how at the tenth cup all is crystal-clear. She did not look forward to this feast, but as it had to be endured, she endured it.

Ah Lai had been busied much of the afternoon with his uncle, Li Po, and Wang Wei. The two girls tittered when they looked at Winter Cherry, but she put on a brave face and made suggestions to them which she hoped they would not accept, but which made her femininity seem a safe secret.

The hour of the monkey had reached its end when Wang Wei sent a servant for her. He was sitting on a rustic bench beside a high bamboo hedge.

"Sit down," he said. "As I and my party are to leave tomorrow, I thought it only fitting to seize now the opportunity of seeing more of you, who are the least known to me of all you four who came on foot from the North. Li Tai Po I know only too well—that compound of genius, loose-living and good heart; the eunuch Han Im I remember well from my last visit to the capital, before I decided that Court was not for me and that a few simple herbs and fresh spring water led a man nearer to the Eight Fold Path than the rich messes of cookery and the cellars of wealthy men." He seemed quite sincere in all this, so that Winter Cherry, in spite of the rich morning meal and the evening's promised banquet, made no protest at apparent inconsistency. Wang Wei looked at her, and then went on: "I now know Ah Lai to be the nephew of Li Po, and to possess the virtues and faults of his age—impulsiveness and lack of breadth. But of you, young fellow, I know nothing, and it is not my custom nor my pleasure to know nothing of those with whom I share a table, however meagre."

Winter Cherry replied: "Sir, the deference which youth owes to age prevents my making a fitting reply. It is true that Li Po,

Han Im, Ah Lai and I came on foot from the north, and it is also true that Chang-an, the Capital, lies to the north. This should have given you a clue that questions are sometimes better left unasked, for knowledge of high secrets is often fatal to both parties—the teller and the hearer. But even I, who have seen so few summers, may with diffidence point out that we came here expecting to find the place empty, and that your kind hospitality was none of our seeking nor of our expecting. It does not, therefore, give you the right to demand an answer to your question.”

Wang Wei smiled. “Let me tell you a story,” he said. “Two years ago, towards the end of summer, I was in Chang-an. There had been the usual banquets and orgies of poetry, for those of the Court do not realise that the simple life is worth a hundred hundreds of examples of refined cookery and unrefined taste. Well, one day, when I was walking in the Park (for even then, at fifty-three, a certain freedom was allowed me) I met a girl whose name was Winter Cherry. She had not long come into the Emperor’s family, and was more than a little homesick. We talked, and in the course of our talk it turned out that she came from a village through which I had lately passed. Naturally, she asked for news of home. Later, when I sat with my lamp and my thoughts, I wrote:

*Have you really come from my village?
Then you should know all the village news.
Does the sun still slant in swords through my silken window,
And do the plums shyly bloom in the afternoon?*

I was pleased with the poem.”

Winter Cherry said: “It is indeed a poem to be pleased with.”

“If I may excuse the coincidence by expressing my own willingness to forget all that you have not said, I will do so, but when you start at a man’s touch, so, even if the man be a physician like myself, I may claim forgiveness for thinking that it is possible for Winter Cherry, whom I so well remember, and yourself, who wear so awkwardly a man’s clothes, to be one and the same.”

Winter Cherry left him without reply and went back to the house. Ah Lai found her crying, with her bundle half-packed, the

flute sticking forlornly from its end.

"I must go away," she said, and told him of Wang Wei's suspicions. "I shall bring misfortune upon you all. He is acquainted with my father and, the interfering old man, is prepared to bring us together, like one of the gods in the old plays. He spoke to me two years ago, when he was at the Capital, and has not forgotten me, as I had hoped."

"You want to see your father?" Ah Lai asked.

She sobbed: "When a girl leaves her father's house to enter that of the Emperor, she has nothing further to do with her father—if she is an ordinary girl, like me. I know that the Lady Yang's family has been honoured by the Emperor, so that her relatives have been given titles, but I am not the Lady Yang."

"These stupid old men!" Ah Lai cried.

Then Li Po entered and sat down with them.

He said: "Whenever I allow my heart and my inclination to rule my actions, I find that I have been unwise. I contrived a desire for change with my foolish whim to do a favour to you, girl, and now every evil that can be has descended on me. Alas, there is no poetry in the world this bitter day."

Ah Lai replied: "You, sir, are not alone. Winter Cherry, here, finds her sex suspected by Wang Wei, who is inclined to hint at the improper. Liu Shen-hsu has his own ideas, too, and desires to draw advantages from them, and the two singing-girls look askance at her. No, assuredly you are not alone."

"But that is not all," Li Po went on, as if he had not heard what Ah Lai had said. "When I gaily walked out of my Porcelain Pavilion, the affair had the outlines of a prank, such as is amusing to middle-aged fools like myself. Han Im regarded it as an escape for himself and a good deed for the girl. Had that been all it would have been all. But a while ago they tell me that a traveller passed through from Chang-an, and politics seem to have combined with major strategy to undo us. In short, they say that the rebel An Lu-shan has gathered his forces and is marching on the Capital. T'ung Kuan Pass has fallen. The road lies open. The Emperor's forces are almost in a state of rebellion, saying that as the result

of government by girls and eunuchs they are ill-armed and ill-trained, and that unless the Lady Yang is sent away they can no longer be counted on as soldiers. Nevertheless the Emperor has prevailed on the officers of his guard to withdraw with him from the Capital to the South, leaving An Lu-shan an empty triumph. Alas, this is the South, and, if they should pass through here, as is most likely, I fear that an angry, disappointed Emperor and the officers of a dissatisfied army will display to me little of the courtesy to which I am accustomed. I fear that I, too, must flee before they come."

"I should have done better to have put myself down a well," Winter Cherry said. "I have brought disaster on all of you three."

"When will they be here?" Ah Lai asked, and the poet shook his head.

"Tomorrow, at earliest," he replied. "But I shall not wait for them. You, boy, will come with me. I owe it to my sister's dead husband to safeguard you."

Ah Lai cried: "Then, my uncle, it is a debt you will not pay, for I shall stop here, to see that no ill befalls the girl. She, surely, is in much greater danger than you, who can always charm anger away with a jade phrase. And Han Im, too, is more in danger. What of his plans?"

Li Po said: "He must decide. But even I cannot waste the time to argue with a stubborn nephew. I have told you my plans. What you do now, if you disobey me, is your own affair."

Winter Cherry cried: "You must go with him. I will not endanger your life and your relations with your family."

"I shall not go," Ah Lai declared.

Then Wang Wei entered, bringing with him an atmosphere of decision.

"I have heard the news," he said. "As host it therefore frees me to arrange what is to be done. As you will be aware, when my wife died (I had seen thirty-one summers at the time) I left all official duties and returned to a small place on the western slope of this mountain. There I enjoy peace and sufficiency, save for an occasional revisit to the world of men. My coming here was really

a courtesy to Liu Shen-hsu, who showed a regrettable reluctance to leave my roof. I therefore came with him. That courtesy has, I feel, extended far enough. I am going home alone. But to you, Li Po, I have always extended the shelter of my poor roof: you shall come with me, if you will. Liu goes elsewhere, at his own pleasure. Ah Lai, I know would prefer to remain here (for reasons which he is reluctant to admit, and which I shall not state). Han Im stays, too, since he feels that, whatever may come, it is unfitting for a man of his figure to be running round the country looking for cover.

"But the trouble does not materialise until tomorrow, and I have invited a friend, Peng Yeh, who lives near here at Ma Wei, to dinner. Therefore that dinner shall be held, and at early dawn the party will break up. Have you anything to say, Li Po?"

Li Po replied at once: "With your permission, I shall leave immediately to prepare your household for your return. It was my purpose, when I left on this wild scheme, to remove myself from danger and boredom. If, now, danger and boredom follow me, I must go further. My nephew—I leave him at your care, Wang Wei. The ties of blood engendered by a sister's choice and nightly efforts cannot now control me. I take it that you will see that Han Im does not lack comforts? We left Chang-an without the time even to collect money. At least, he did. To you, girl, who caused all this, my farewells and good wishes. All my life I have found women and trouble delightfully interlocked. The technique of cutting that union is only gained by considerable experience, and others, less skilled, are apt to be jealous of that technique. In fact, you will say that I am selfish. I am. Farewell to you all."

He went out without looking behind him. Wang Wei laughed.

"He was always able in self-protection," he said. "We shall eat towards the end of the hour of the cock. And, girl, I think you had better abandon this masquerade and return to the clothes of your proper sex, which is proclaimed by every line of you."

When he had gone, Ah Lai and Winter Cherry stood looking at each other.

"That is as it may be," she said, "but I have no clothes other than

those of yours, and there are the two other troubles—Liu Shen-hsu and my father. You did not know that my family name is Peng?”

She told him of Wang Wei's invitation to her parent to attend the dinner.

* * *

Honeysuckle sniffed.

“If a father cannot recognise his own daughter, even when she is dressed and painted as a singing girl, can it really be said that he is a fit person to control her?” she demanded. “I should have thought that it would have been simple for her to go to some other place.” She busied herself with making the most of Winter Cherry's remaining hair, with the aid of a headdress which concealed much of it.

Clear Rain, mixing powders, said: “Of course, this boy here seems to think that he knows best, and Winter Cherry listens to what he says as if he were one of the seven wise men. Still, we will try.”

“And if she had gone away,” Ah Lai laughed, scornfully, “Wang Wei would have told her father, and then she would have been searched for and brought back. Now Wang Wei will regard the whole thing as a joke of his own making, and will not reveal her secret. But we shall be compelled to introduce Winter Cherry by some other name, as a girl who came here after you two, being prevented by illness from coming earlier. That will excuse her poor performance, for I do not imagine that she is as skilled in the arts of entertainment as you two. She shall be called Foam on the Stream. I have never met one of that name, and thus we can remedy the omission.”

“Go away while I change her clothes,” Clear Rain said. “To remain would be a privilege of which you are unworthy. I have no proof so far that you have demonstrated yourself to be a man.”

Ah Lai replied: “A man must have opportunity first.”

Honeysuckle laughed: “Make it,” and the three of them pushed him out of the door. “Tell the honourable Wang Wei of her new name.”

* * *

Winter Cherry had been dressed and powdered in the con-

ventional way, and now she, Honeysuckle and Clear Rain sat side by side on the bed talking together as if they had known each other for many moons.

"I am reminded," Clear Rain was saying, "of stories—many stories—of young romance, but I had never hoped to assist, myself, in the attainment of the happy ending which these stories sometimes have."

Winter Cherry put down the polished copper mirror in which she was trying to recognise herself, and said: "I do not expect a happy ending. Such things only happen to people in stories. But, though some people have been kind to me before, Ah Lai is the first man who has ridden straight towards the threatening spears of circumstance."

Clear Rain laughed: "You see that she has been associating with poets. What words!"

Honeysuckle smoothed the sleeve of the silk jacket which she had lent to Winter Cherry, her dark, sleek head nodding judged assent. "It suits you," she said. "He is very young, and quite foolish; but all men are that, at some time or other. At least, I have found them so. I remember——"

But the reminiscence was cut short by the entry of Wang Wei and another man whose tanned skin and easy, balanced stride bespoke the countryman. Before his steady eyes Winter Cherry's face paled beneath her powder, but she restrained herself from showing by any sign that this was her father. They stood up.

Wang Wei waved a hand towards them. "We had intended a party by a stream in the moonlight after the classic manner," he said. "I was hoping to show to you, Peng Yeh, how much you missed by living secluded in your country fastnesses, remote from the pleasures of the town. Not that I believe, myself, in these frivolities, but it amuses me to see others stretch forward an eager hand to grasp the nettle's lovely blossom. These are the nettles. Their names are Honeysuckle, Clear Rain, and, in the middle, Foam on the Stream, who only arrived today, having been delayed by illness or family matters or I know not what."

The three kotowed deeply without venturing to speak.

Peng Yeh inclined his head. "I am honoured and embarrassed by the warmth of your hospitality," he said. "For me, the country amidst which I live necessitates no such opulent display of beauty. We manage, you know, with a wife and perhaps another girl or two to relieve her, a few servants and simple food. Myself, I have one son and two daughters now, since my eldest went to the family of the Emperor. So you see how ill able I am to do justice to your thoughtful providal of these sterile blooms from an exotic tree."

Clear Rain murmured: "That would make life easy."

Wang Wei said: "You will need a short rest, sir, before our meal. Your servants and horses are being attended to. Will you do me the honour of using my poor room?"

They moved out and down the passage.

Winter Cherry cried: "He is just the same still. He is like a plum flowering amidst wisteria—honesty amidst snow."

"They bloom at different days of the season," Honeysuckle said. "You behaved yourself well. And I wish that my father had trained me, as yours has, not to bite my nails. Look at that!" She held out her hands for inspection.

* * *

Wang Wei was speaking. "The Empress Wu-chao, who built the beginnings of this house, furnished this room especially for entertainments," he said. "To me, a simple man, it is somewhat overpowering to consider the beauties and the talents which must, in the past, have gathered here."

Liu said: "We are not so far from the noises of Chang-an as to be unable to reproduce some, at least, of the curious scenes which these walls must have seen. I am full of anticipation."

Ah Lai whispered to Winter Cherry: "Do not forget that you have been ill and cannot partake of these so-called curious scenes. The mind of the poet Liu is not like your mind, or my mind."

"Sh!" Winter Cherry whispered back.

Peng Yeh rose to his feet. "Alas," he began, "that I should have to confess myself so ignorant in these matters of entertainment! Alas that to me even the famous *Hunting of the Emperor's Charms* should

be a largely unopened scroll, of almost unintelligible writing. Since I, sirs, am so far from being your equal in this field, could not we students have a lesson from one, at least, of so learned an assembly of experts? But, before we hear that, may I propose the healths of you all? To the honourable Wang Wei, who combines in one person literature and painting, medicine and fishing, wisdom and simplicity. To Liu Shen-hsu, whose written words bid fair to excuse his present comparative silence. To Han Im, whose outlook on life has not been jaundiced, but merely simplified. To Ah Lai, the to-be-famous nephew of the great (though absent) Li Tai-po, whose youth promises what his age will fulfil. To these three girls, who personify so charmingly skill in the arts of love, whose measured movements serve as meat for the poet's thoughts and who themselves, in the flesh, serve cunningly the dessert for that meat. To you all!"

They all drank and Peng Yeh sat down on Wang Wei's left.

Liu rose. "I am sure that the honourable Wang Wei would not desire to outrage his modesty by replying to such an eulogy as that which we have just heard," he began. Then he chanted, improvising:

*Charms and magic are things of the night,
But these girls do not shun the sunlight.
The orchid is hard to cultivate,
But beauty blinds while its bloom lasts.
Love may be hidden at the lattice
Or run, naked, on windswept grass.
To Hunt the Charms of the Emperor
May not interest the physician or the landowner,
But to the poet who loves words or women
Each are best in simple nakedness.
A word is shrouded by its neighbours in the sentence
And beauty is loveliest alone.
Give me scissors, that I may snip them from their context,
And then, who knows,
I may scale Chung-nan in hot pursuit.*

Ah Lai drained his cup of wine and rose to his feet.

"I cannot converse in verse," he said, "nor can the pros and cons in prose with brilliance inverse to their meaning, but I find Liu's suggestions almost . . ." he hesitated, and knew that the wine was strong, ". . . shocking. Even my absent uncle's past pales before them, and I, like a snail yet short of the winning-post, passed by the speedier, or an archer, plucking his erring string to hit the gold but finding the easier outer . . . that was going to be a good sentence," he concluded, "but the beginning of it has escaped me."

He sat down suddenly, and Honeysuckle giggled as she picked up her lute. "I shall sing you a love-song," she said and began:

*The phoenix mates the phoenix and
Their nest is ashes:
The swallow in the eaves abandons
building, flashes
Out to love under the bow-spanned
Sky: 'neath your lashes
Shines love . . . love, and under my hand
Your knotted sash is
Loose—my heart, do you understand—
The phoenix mates the phoenix and
Their nest is ashes?*

They all applauded her as the last notes of her lute put a period to the song. Clear Rain sang, without accompaniment:

*The arms of love are white and clinging;
(The voice of love was born to sing),
The feet of love seem lilies, running;
(The words of love are never done).
The eyes of love need never lattice;
(The hands of love can open that);
The heart of love is smooth, as mine is—
(The whole of love, my love, is thine).*

Then the servants brought in jellied duck soup, turned out from little bowls, and everybody laughed at Clear Rain's song.

"What is poetry coming to?" Wang Wei demanded. "To an old

man like myself such innovations in rhyme seem to fall between bad verse and bad prose."

Ah Lai said, from his position at the table: "When I write the poems which will make my name immortal, they will have rhymes like those."

Liu suggested: "And now let the third member of this trio of girls do something to contribute to our pleasure. So far she has merely sat and eaten, and eaten and sat. Let her perform."

"She has been ill lately," Honeysuckle said. "If you would have the kindness to excuse her . . ."

"You see how pale she is under her powder," Clear Rain added.

Liu persisted: "If she comes here to entertain us, she can surely do more than sit like the spirit of a white fox in the mist . . ."

Winter Cherry volunteered: "I can play the flute."

"You see!" Liu cried. "She has a tongue, besides the other things which we would expect a woman to have."

Ah Lai said: "I want to hear the other two girls sing again. She can play while they sing."

Wang Wei, reprovingly, observed: "You are the youngest man here."

Han Im, who had spoken little during the first part of the meal, interposed.

"I shall tell a story," he said. "If, after that story you all feel as you felt before—well. If not—well, also."

Wang Wei asked: "So is your story a destroyer of appetites?"

"No," Han Im replied. "It concerns a man whose name was Tseng, who lived during the great dynasty of the Hans, and is known as the story of the man who was jealous of his housekeeper."

"I have not heard this story," said Wang Wei, and they all prepared to listen.

"There was once, in a city of the state of Lu," Han Im began, "a man whose wife had, against his will, entered into a compact with the moon-spirits, so that she was unable to cook for him or to perform any of her household duties. Finding this state of affairs intolerable, he sent her back to her father's family with a letter to explain the matter, for it seemed more fitting to him that her parents

should have the necessity of breaking this compact of hers—a compact which must in some measure have been due to a lack of proper parental upbringing—than that he, her husband, should be compelled both to endure the indigestion caused by her cooking and to undertake the no doubt lengthy process of re-education and exorcism.”

“I have met cases like that in my medical experience,” Wang Wei put in. “They are usually incurable.”

Han Im continued: “Yes. Well, when he had got rid of his wife and put up the statutory notice to that effect upon his main house-door, Tseng began to look round for a housekeeper. He felt, reasonably enough, that he would prefer not to commit himself to any permanent arrangement after the so obvious failure of his marriage, of which there had been no issue. With a housekeeper who may be dismissed at any time, a man has the advantage of the method of trial and error. After a week’s search and enquiry amongst his friends and acquaintances, he was told of a woman who seemed in every way suitable. She, too, had been driven to independence by the strange conduct of her own partner, who had excited the interest of the neighbours by stripping his wife naked at the village well and painting the Buddhist symbol of the *mantse* in eight different places on her bare skin. This done, he had allowed her to find her way home alone, saying that, if she followed *The Eightfold Path*, she could only go astray seven times.”

Liu Shen-hsu observed: “There is much of this religious symbolism even nowadays, when we should imagine that the superstitions of earlier dynasties would have been swept away by better education.”

They had finished the jellied soup, and the main dish of shredded duck, rice, peppers and mushrooms was brought in.

Han Im continued: “The man Tseng engaged this woman and settled down to a quiet life, prepared to try her in all ways. He found almost immediately that a housekeeper is more expensive than a wife, since it is needful to provide her with both salary and house-keeping money, but she seemed a good cook in all respects save one, and that difficulty (for she proved incapable of boiling beans to the

right degree of edibility) was overcome by hiring a girl who possessed some experience in the matter. The housekeeper soon found that the girl (whose name, if it matters, was Dawn Gate) could cook more than beans, and rapidly handed over to her all culinary duties. This girl's pay, though small, had also to come from the not-too-capacious sleeves of the man Tseng. Nevertheless he felt that the absence of indigestion made up for much of the expense.

"One day he sent for the housekeeper, and when she had stood before him long enough for him to muster his thoughts, he addressed her thus: 'When I engaged you, it was understood that, in return for your salary, you should undertake all the household duties. I do not object greatly to the hiring of the girl Dawn Gate, for certainly she can cook well, and she is not expensive, as girls go. But today I was told in the market place that you are seeking to hire another girl to do the sewing and mending. If this goes on, you will soon have as many as ten girls to do your work, and this was not my intention when I engaged you. What have you to say to this?'

"His housekeeper replied: 'What you have said is very true, and yet, if you had not engaged me, you would be subject to the demands of all these various girls, unable to defend yourself. As it is, I stand between you and them. Thus you may in peace and confidence see your household kept in order, while I, in return for my labours in organising and controlling them, enjoy for a short time each day a little leisure and freedom to reflect on the causes which have thus satisfied both of us.' Tseng looked at his store of silver, now not so large as before, and said: 'That is all very well, but I think that, in order to satisfy both ourselves and our neighbours, it would be better if you came into my household permanently. Thus you would gain warmth at night and authority in dealing with the girls.' His housekeeper answered, laughing: 'And you would be saving my salary and gaining the right to paint religious symbols on my person! Oh, no: if the arrangement does not suit you, I can always return to my own husband. I hear from friends that he has spoken kindly of me since I left him. Then you would be able to do what you will with the girls of your house. The sewing-girl comes tomorrow. She is a big, powerful girl, and I cannot think why she

has not married already. Her name is Deep Well, and I expect that the name suits her.' She bowed and left him."

Clear Rain observed: "He seems to have had all the trouble and expense without the usual compensations."

Han Im went on: "Tseng was perplexed by this state of affairs, and often, when he knew that his housekeeper was sleeping soundly in her room while he, from behind the lock of his door, had perpetually to be assuring his growing number of maid-servants that he needed nothing more save quiet. he would reflect on the days when his difficulties were limited to one woman, and his store of silver was higher than now.

"Then, one day, he found that a ball of paper had been put into the lock of his room, so that the key would not turn. He went to his store, and found that his housekeeper had moved it to some other hiding-place. As he was leaving the house, his housekeeper called after him: 'You are going out.' But determination lent wings to his feet, and he did not answer her. He went to the nearest Buddhist temple and took vows as a novice. Here, in the peace of religious contemplation, he forgot to consider his indigestion. The housekeeper, who had chosen her sewing-maids carefully, now set a blue lantern over the door and began to invite, to the house the men of the town. The store of silver grew higher and higher. Dawn Gate proved very popular, and Deep Well justified her name. The housekeeper's husband, hearing of this, came to live in the house on the best possible terms, since he could not be turned out by his own wife, and the only loser was the wife of the man Tseng, for the magistrate, hearing of the illegal compact with the spirits of the moon, had her whipped in public and sent to another city. The man Tseng, when he was being initiated into the full Buddhist faith, reflected that the little pastilles of burning sulphur which had been stuck to his shaven head really caused much less pain than the loss of his house, his money and his position. That is all the story."

They laughed to show that they did not understand Han Im's story. Only Wang Wei, leaning over, whispered to Han Im: "You show so perfect an understanding of the mind of a woman that I find it hard to believe that you have not invented the story."

The servants had brought in the remaining dishes for those capable of eating further. The wine was taken round by Honeysuckle and Clear Rain, and these two pledged the various guests, one by one as they poured out for them.

Peng Yeh said: "This is indeed a delightful party, and quite exhilarating for one who, like myself, uses the plough more often than the pen. I wish you to understand how much I appreciate your courtesy and kindness."

Liu grumbled: "It is nearly all eating and drinking, with very little else. For instance, we have not yet heard the flute-playing which was promised us by your young friend Foam on the Stream, who has sat silent and is drinking hardly anything at all."

Then Winter Cherry took her flute and played, alone, *Waiting for the Sunrise*, which they all applauded. When it was done, Liu leaned over to Ah Lai and asked: "And where is your friend of this morning? It is strange that he should disappear and this third girl fill his place."

Ah Lai replied: "If my friend chooses to go, it can only be because of the way in which you treated him. If this girl, Foam on the Stream, arrives late because of family troubles, am I to know the precise reason? Better that you should devote yourself to entertaining our friend Peng Yeh, to whom you have said hardly a word. Here are the two girls and their wine jar. Now is your opportunity to aid the honourable Wang Wei in acting his difficult part of host."

And, indeed, Clear Rain and Honeysuckle were pouring out wine for Peng Yeh and Liu Shen-hsu.

"To poetry and agriculture," Clear Rain cried, and they drank the toast.

Honeysuckle said, raising her own cup when she had refilled theirs: "To town and country: may they never know how much they need each other."

"That is a peculiar toast," Liu said. "I suppose she means that to know our dependence is humiliating."

"The town is but a disease of the country," Peng replied. "Alas, your wine has made me sleepy, and I have far to go tomorrow. I almost feel inclined to ask the permission of my host to retire, early

as it is. I feel that drowsiness and verbal brilliance consort ill."

And, in fact, everyone seemed sleepy, so that the little bowls of melon-seeds were only half empty when Wang Wei led the way from the room, full of apologies for the exhilarating effect of mountain air.

* * *

It was quite early in the hour of the rat, and a thin moon shed sparse light through the oiled paper windows of the room where Winter Cherry lay alone. From the next room an occasional treble snore told that Honeysuckle and Clear Rain were asleep. The rest of the house seemed shrouded in silence, a silence so deep as to seem unnatural. Winter Cherry lay on her back, wondering why the party had broken up with so dramatic a suddenness, why Wang Wei had gone off to his room without the usual leave-taking of his guests, why her unrecognising father, Peng Yeh, had just disappeared, and why Clear Rain and Honeysuckle had not chattered, as should have been their wont, before finally blowing out the lamp. And Liu . . . she felt that Liu had intended to talk to her. Ah Lai had seemed angered by Liu's attitude. The boy was amusingly proprietorial about her. Calf-love. His impassioned declaration at the Pavilion of Porcelain, before they had started off on their walk—she would have laughed at him if it had not been for the turmoil in her mind. But then, kindness had filled the void in her heart, and what would, at another time, have seemed laughable had then touched her as the magic jade in the story had touched and turned dross to gold. The Emperor . . .

Then Ah Lai came in like a peacock, preening.

"They are all asleep," he told her.

She replied: "To sleep at night is natural. We did not do so last night, and I should have thought that you would be tired. But I cannot close my eyes without waking up. It seems as if one could be too tired to sleep."

"It does not matter if the others are tired or no," he said. "They sleep. It was magic stuff, that medicine from Wang Wei's box which I put in the wine. And to think that those two girls believed me when I told them that it was a love elixir! They were pouring

the wine, and probably drank more than the others. Listen to their snoring!"

"You put a medicine in the wine?" she cried. "Then that is why everything is so silent. But you should not have done so. It might have caused harm. My father . . ."

He reassured her: "The honourable Wang Wei did not have any, and he knew what I was doing. I told him that the girls had threatened to come to my room, so he gave me the medicine. He is very old-fashioned."

She began again: "My father——"

"Come and see your father," he said.

Peng Yeh was sleeping with his face towards the door. Winter Cherry saw a smile on his face. His breathing was regular and easy. She knelt down before the bed and kotowed three times. Ah Lai wanted to laugh. Then he knelt with her and kotowed too.

"You need not be so quiet," he told her. "He only took one large cup, but look how soundly he sleeps!" He lifted Peng Yeh's hand and put it under the rugs. Peng Yeh's breathing did not alter in its rhythm. They went out together, back to Winter Cherry's room.

"Save for the honourable Wang Wei, who is at the opposite end of the house, we are alone together," Ah Lai said. "I have waited for this since first I saw you at the Pavilion of Porcelain. Did you not wonder, when I told you that I loved you, why I told you so? Did you not wonder that I, young as I am, found courage to say so? And did you not give me a little cause to hope?"

"I am afraid of Liu," she answered. "Did he, too, drink of your medicine?"

"Nearly as much as the girls," he told her.

They went to look at Liu. He slept with his mouth open, and his narrow lips seemed cruel, his nose as if it were about to twitch.

"I think it would be amusing to carry the two girls here, to his room," Ah Lai said, "and put them in his bed. He would be angered to wake and find them there in the morning."

She shook her head. "That would not be fair," she replied. "It is hardly for me, who belong to the Emperor, to say that a girl should only go to a man if she desires to go to him, but I do say so.

I would not have them made unhappy. They have shown me kindness."

"You are no longer the Emperor's," he cried. "You are mine. Whatever has been is past and forgotten."

"It cannot be forgotten," she said, "if I bear the Emperor a child."

"If could be forgotten, even then," he answered. "But you will not bear the Emperor a child."

She said simply: "I do not know, yet."

"Let the child be mine—be ours," he said.

She answered: "No. And it is not right that you and I should talk of these things, under the same roof as my father."

"I cannot understand your mind," he protested. "What difference does it make to truth if your father be sleeping here, under the same roof? Does your father know who you are? Did he not lose his responsibility for you a while ago, when you left him? It is the Emperor who should answer to your father. Do you hate the Emperor?"

She answered: "I do not know. I had never slept with him before—or with any man. I do not know if I hate him. I only know that I have not slept for a long while, and my eyes are heavy. Even so, I am not sure whether I shall sleep."

"You will sleep," he said. "Lie down. So. I will stay with you—nothing more. It seems foolish to act thus, but I am prepared to be foolish. Lie down. Put your head down, so, away from the thin moon against the window. A rug over you—thus. Now I shall count this as one of the emergencies of Mencius, for I shall hold your hand in mine, so, and you will sleep. . . . You do not want to ask Wang Wei about the Emperor, do you? He would know if you were going to have a child. These doctors know far too much. A husband should know—not a doctor, but if you wish. . . ."

She murmured: "No. It would be wise of you and better for both of us, if you went next door. You will become famous, like your uncle Li Po—it is not right for you to think of me, who would only be a weight against your climbing. Leave me alone, and forget. They are there, and you say they are asleep." She took her hand from his. He was not sure if there was the faintest

squeeze. . . .

He tiptoed to the door, and behind him Winter Cherry's breathing settled down into the steady breathing of one who is asleep.

* * *

Ah Lai stood before the bed on which Honeysuckle and Clear Rain lay. The single small lamp which they had forgotten to put out threw a gentle light over their dark heads, turned towards each other. A gleam was reflected back to him from Honeysuckle's hair, loose from its pins.

"She sent me to you," he whispered. "And I do not want you." He turned down the rug. "You cannot hear, so what does it matter if I say, again, that I do not want you? My uncle would write a poem about the petals of flowers, seeing the breasts of Honeysuckle, I know. And he would include the moon, for good measure, and weave a silken scarf of words about you as you lie there for me to see. He would imagine you as all the girls whom he has ever desired, and speak of his desire in allegory and metaphor. He would bring his mouth between your breasts and say: 'I love you,' in rhyme and perfect cadence. I can but follow his example, without the rhyme, so—saying not 'I love you' but 'I love Winter Cherry, whom you represent and who you are, now, in my imagining.' Then my uncle would take paper and brush and ink and put you into words. I have no words. What would he say? Or sing?

*'The moon blanches your breasts:
I can think only of sugared cakes
In which my cook, thoughtlessly
Has fixed, a little off centre, the customary cherry'."*

Honeysuckle opened her eyes and sat up.

"That love elixir has made me very sleepy," she said. "And yet I did not drink much, for we girls learn to appear to drink when we really do not."

"It was not a love elixir," Ah Lai told her. "It was a sleeping medicine which will do no harm. I got it from the honourable

Wang Wei."

"My sister always drinks more than I do," she said, looking at Clear Rain and drawing the rug up to the other girl's chin. "Shall I come with you to your room?"

"I did not intend to awaken you," he answered, "The sleeping medicine, I thought, would be enough. I was pretending that you were Winter Cherry."

She laughed. "You are very young. Men do not usually tell girls that girls are all the same, but they think so. At least, I have found it so." She swung herself off the bed. "Clear Rain is just like this, too. Look!" She turned down the rug, then put it back. "And if you want Winter Cherry, why do you not take her? Girls like to be taken."

"You do not understand," he said. "This is different."

Honeysuckle ignored this. "This night is hot," she went on. "Why do you not take off at any rate your outer clothes? Or we could go and swim in the pool by the woods. That will be cooler. It does not matter to me." Then, as he hesitated, she put on a long blue coat and her shoes. "Now that I am warmer, you should be cooler," she said. "Come—we will go to the pool."

"I am a fool," Ah Lai replied, following her.

Honeysuckle chattered as her short steps kept up with his. "My father taught me to swim before he died. Many girls cannot swim, I know. Clear Rain cannot. But I have never forgotten. It is one of the things which one does not forget. You can swim? How thin the moon is! The shadows seem only a little blacker than the stones by the path. There is the pool. They say that Han Meng-tsu used to swim here, at night, too. He died, you know. Wang Wei was his great friend. But your uncle, Li Po, will have told you of Han Meng-tsu. Look—the moon is in the water. Your uncle always writes about the moon. He seems very fond of it. One might almost say that he loves the moon. The weeds are on the other side: this is quite clear. Give me your hand: I do not know how deep it is, just here. Ah, the bottom is stone. Come: the water is lovely and cool, like a lover who does not know desire. If this were the whole of life! Do not stand there watching me!

Of what use is it if I bring you to the pool and you only watch me? I will swim to the other end, if you are shy, though why you should be shy, with such an uncle, I do not know."

She moved off through the silent water, her dark head a shadow on the quiet ripples, hardly stirring the black, round plates of the water-lilies. Ah Lai slipped off his clothes, shivered as he put a toe into the water, then stooped and with hands and feet on the hard, stone bottom, looked out at the surrounding trees, the faint line of the clouds, the bank. . . . He waded in farther, upright now. The cool water rose to his waist, to his chest. The lilies, nearer, rustled continuously together with the ripples of his movement.

Honeysuckle came up in front of him from her noiseless dive. She was holding one foot close to her face.

"Something sharp on the bottom," she said. "Carry me."

He picked her up and waded to the shore. She was unaccountably warm in his arms, and her hands clung to his shoulders when he put her down and knelt beside her.

"You are very strong," Honeysuckle told him, in woman's earliest gambit.

* * *

Han Im turned uncomfortably in his sleep, and (like Chuang Tzu's butterfly) his consciousness came near the surface. In this half-waking state he was aware of doubts as to the wisdom of his actions. At the Porcelain Pavilion he had stressed the need for haste if escape were to be successful—now he was dallying here, at the Poet's Pleasure Cottage—he told himself with sleepy scorn—while along the roads the Emperor's messenger rode post haste in search of a girl, a poet and an eunuch!

Winter Cherry's fate he could dimly descry, but women, he reflected, were meant to suffer in the end, and were better fitted than men to endure pain and punishment, by reason of their inferior sensibility. The poet? Li Po would escape anything, as he had always escaped everything, by a mixture of bluff and lying. And (Han Im reflected, waking up) Li Po had shown the good sense to remove himself to another place, remote from what would be the immediate cause of the Emperor's wrath. Himself? By persistence

and intrigue had eunuchs come to exercise an increasing power in the palace, a power commensurate only with that of the favoured Lady Yang and her family, and now, with so perfect an opportunity for venting rage on a eunuch, would it be to be wondered at if the Emperor's inventiveness rose to the occasion? Han Im had seen examples of the Emperor's inventiveness. He shivered a little and drew up the clothes, determined to be miserable.

And to think that he had only, as an added reason for his sentimental folly, the sudden, worshipping passion of Ah Lai for this girl Winter Cherry! Had he, Han Im, shown himself so unworldly, so unwise, simply from transferred emotions? Had he sublimated his almost forgotten but ever present loss into actions which would put him forever beyond the reach of further loss—save of his head?

Conscious that his thoughts were being muddled, and since it would be stupid indeed to get up and do something now, immediately, when dawn hesitated like a laggard dancer, Han Im slept.

He was awakened in earnest by the loud beating on the main door, and his heart leaped to his throat. Well, let them find him in the dignified sleep of one whose conscience is clear! He lay, flat on his back, the wooden pillow making him think every moment more regretfully of an executioner's block, his arms straight at his side, controlling his breathing to the steady rustle of innocence.

The knocking was repeated. There were men's voices, and a women's voice, raised. This woman's voice seemed familiar. Then he heard a man cry: "Open for the Lady Yang!" and become on the instant cool, awake and capable.

He went out, lit a torch and unbarred the door. Sleepily, beside him, Ah Lai came from the room which Li Po had occupied, and Han Im spared a moment to wonder why the sleeping arrangements had been changed. Could the girl have turned him out so soon?

The Lady Yang came towards them from her carrying chair. She wore the same dark blue robe in which he had last seen her, at the Aloe Pavilion, and her hair was still dressed high upon her forehead. Han Im had the impression that she had been hurried in her departure, for the Lady Yang was not accustomed to be

seen twice by the same man in the same clothes.

"His Imperial Majesty sent me first, with the forces under General Tung," she said. "Is there a place where I can rest?"

Han Im replied: "There is certainly a place where you can rest, for it is unseemly that the flower of the Emperor's garden should thus be exposed to the chill air of night. Come with me." To the chair-carriers he said: "Wait."

As she followed him into the house, she said: "It would seem that you have not heard the news. There were no beacons. The Pass has fallen. An Lu-shan and his barbarians have marched on the capital and the Emperor follows us."

"But why?" Han Im asked. The door of Wang Wei's room stood open, and there was every sign that the occupant had left. He went into the room and set the bed ready for her. "You can rest here," he said. "Why does not the royal army crush these barbarians? Is it intended to let them enter the city?"

She sat down with the sigh of one who is tired.

"The army will not fight," she said. "They complain that they are ill-armed and ill-led. Only General Tung remains loyal, and his troops are few. Some are here, now—the rest will come with the Emperor. No, the city cannot be defended."

Han Im bowed. "I shall leave you," he said. "Doubtless the General will give me other news. Rest now."

Outside the house the chair-carriers were stacking their chairs. He showed them where to go, to the servants' quarters. Ah Lai came up, talking to a short, squat Southerner with sharp eyes.

"This is General Tung," Ah Lai said. "You know him?"

The General answered: "We know each other. Lead me to a room where we may talk. You may come with us, boy."

When Han Im and the General had seated themselves in the empty hall, Tung said: "You clearly have not heard the news—or all of it. The situation is serious."

Han Im replied: "No situation is too serious to be met by resolution. Until a man is dead, that is. What has happened?"

The other said: "The rebel, An Lu-shan, has struck. The men under my control are sound, but for the rest" He made a

gesture of helplessness. "Already, since we left with the Lady Yang, a swift runner reached me with a tale of wholesale elimination of her relatives and of sundry others, of your sort, at the Palace. I left an Emperor's Guard: His Majesty will follow. But we are few—I do not see how we can resist the numbers which will be brought against us. Who is here?"

Han Im told him: "Wang Wei seems to have gone. Li Po went yesterday. Liu—I do not know, but I believe he sleeps somewhere. There are three singing-girls and this lad, Li Po's nephew, whom you met before me. And the servants. And Peng Yeh, whose farm is on the slope of Ma Wei, and who was passing through on his way to Chang-an."

"When a eunuch leaves the palace, there is a reason," replied General Tung. "None of those whom you have named seem to me sufficient reason for your presence here. Li Po, who came with you, would have served, but he has left you, you say. Why, then, have you deserted the pleasures of Chang-an for the austerities on this mountain residence?"

Han Im said: "Enough that I came. It seems to me, now, that the immediate need is some plan for the future of the Lady Yang. They have killed her relations? Then she, too, is in danger."

Tung laughed: "It shall be as you wish. The subject is evidently one which you wish to change. It is changed. We must, of course, retreat as soon as the Emperor reaches here. The West is wide and wild. Until the forces of loyal men can be raised, we must, like the chess-player, withdraw our weak defence into the impenetrable hills. The western provinces may be loyal. They probably will be, with my men to make up their minds. I brought a few boxes of silver for immediate needs—it seemed to me that when His Imperial Majesty finally decides to take the road hither, he may forget, in his haste, such a worldly detail as that. And, since you are fortunately here, it is your province to take charge of that silver and act as treasurer."

Han Im bowed. "I am honoured," he said.

The General continued: "Transport. Always transport—the problem for all commanders. My men walk. I rode. The Lady

Yang came in a carrying chair, and the silver in another. Can you provide a carriage or two—and horses? Then you had better arrange for them to be ready at dawn. One for you and the silver. One for the Lady Yang. The chairs we can send back. Food? We have enough for two days."

Ah Lai, who had stood silently beside them, now said: "If you will make up your minds as to your next destination, I will go on and arrange for food. I shall require, also, to know how many men will have to be fed. Also by what means of transport I am to go and whether alone. I shall be ready to change your decision into deeds in an hour from now. For the moment I have to say a good-bye." He inclined his head to them and went out of the room.

General Tung observed: "I think he will serve the Emperor well, for he does not foresee difficulties. He shall go. Now, give me paper, brush and ink. My mind needs no other laxative. You will see about the carriages."

* * *

Ah Lai came to the room which he had hoped to share with Winter Cherry. The girl slept, her face pillowed on one arm. He stood for a while looking at her, then turned to go without speaking. But as he turned, Winter Cherry woke.

"I thought that you had gone," she said.

Ah Lai nodded. "I did go," he said, "and now I have returned before going altogether. I have been talking strategy with General Tung."

Her voice was a question. "General Tung?"

He told her of the arrivals from Chang-an, of the revolt and the Emperor's coming journey into the inner provinces. "I have always wanted adventure," he said. "I am to start in less than an hour, to make ready for the Emperor's reception at his next stopping-place—when General Tung tells me what that next stopping-place may be."

"You did not always speak so respectfully of the Emperor," she answered. "But it is as well that you should. I am glad that you did not insist, last, night, on coming here to me. Perhaps

you have realised that it would have been imprudent."

Ah Lai looked at the girl as he listened to her formal speech. There seemed a great distance between them now, and he felt it to be useless to speak, as he had meant to do, of the events of the night. Against the walls of their little world lapped the tide of war, and he knew that, for a time at least, that tide had separated them. And then, suddenly, she sat up, frowning.

"Go and do whatever you have to do," she said. "If, in that doing, it pleases you to know that now I am certain that I shall not bear a child to the Emperor, then you have the right to be pleased. Now go."

"But last night you said . . .," he began.

She answered: "Last night was last night; today is today. Go now about your new duties, and forget me. You are for greater things that I can give you."

He inclined his head. "So you think," he replied, going out.

* * *

The Lady Yang had not rested long, and now, as she stood waiting for Ah Lai to come to her, with the sheer fall of the invisible mountain to the East before her, she felt something of the spirit of a painter who aims to transfer to paper the sweep of rocky land, the sheltering copses, the rushing streamlets, of a countryside which he sees, and which those who look upon his painting will also see but not believe. "He has idealised it," these people will say. "It was not so steep. That stream did not so flash in the sunlight. That wood did not so unbelievably fit into the balance of the picture." Life, she was reflecting, resembled, this landscape. The perfection of her last years with the Emperor were equally incredible. Love, itself, was just such a figment of the imagination, real enough when expressed, but to a hearer of its magic merely a symbol of what the lover hoped to taste. And yet, it was real enough.

Ah Lai came up behind her as she had expected.

"I understand the Emperor now," the boy said. "Before, I thought that no man could have reason for so distilled a delight, but, seeing you, I find all the old tales inadequate before your

reality." Then he laughed. "Why, I am talking like a poet!"

"You are talking in the fashion to which I am accustomed," she replied. "And yet shall I believe that you mean it?"

The steady gaze of her long eyes under the high brow held his eyes. The hair at the back of his neck moved independently of his will. He was not conscious of anything else about her, before the compelling comfort of her eyes.

He replied: "I mean what I have said. And I understand, too, why my uncle would not let me see you when I lived with him at the Porcelain Pavilion, for it seems that, being wise, he feared for me the peril of seeing you. Not that he feared you, for my sake, but that he knew that a man changes when he looks upon you. He changes. He forgets what he was and what he hoped. He knows only that he looks upon you, and the rest of life fades into the shadow of reality. That is what my uncle, Li Po, knew, since he is a poet."

She said: "You say it all very charmingly. I almost seem to hear the words of your uncle. But this is not time for soft words. You can drive a carriage—I know, for I heard the men talking of it. Will you take me away from here, from the soldiers, whom I fear? If the Emperor were here, it would be different, but I do not trust General Tung."

He looked at her, and found that he could not take his eyes away. He forgot Winter Cherry; he forgot Honeysuckle. The world, and the edges of the world moved back and behind him as though he were advancing from the audience on to a brightly lit stage, moving without his own volition, towards the woman who now stood watching him calmly, as if nothing depended on his answer.

He rubbed his eyes.

"I will take you," he said. "I am to start with one carriage as soon as General Tung has written his instructions. You will clothe yourself in ordinary clothes, so that none shall know you. They will think that I am taking another girl with me. And hide those jade pins in your hair. I will bring you clothes, and you will wait here. When I bring the carriage past, you will run out and

climb in."

She nodded, showing no sign of relaxation from the strain of wondering if she could have her way with this youth.

He left her, fetched outer garments from the room of Honey-suckle and Clear Rain, gave them to Yang Kuei Fei and went to see to the horses.

* * *

There was the sound of horses, and of men shouting, so that the night, now less dark under a faint lightening of the Eastern sky, was less quiet also. It seemed that with the coming of these men a dawn wind stirred. A sentry challenged.

General Tung went to meet the Emperor. Behind him Han Im stood, wondering why eunuchs should now stand behind generals, and reflecting on the inversion of proper procedure which war brings in its train. The Captain of the Guard galloped towards them and drew rein in a spectacular whirl of dust in the dark.

"I have performed my duty," he said. "His Imperial Majesty is here." He dismounted.

Behind him the outriders came to a halt, then drew aside. More horsemen emerged from the darkness, and then a carriage drawn by two horses. The Emperor descended from the carriage and advanced towards them. Even in the glistening light of the torches which suddenly appeared in the doorway, the Emperor seemed older, more tired, as if he had shrunk within his robes. Han Im had for a moment the fancy that these robes were draped upon a skeleton. Then the Emperor spoke.

"You are the last of my people," he said. "I have left Chang-an. The palaces of Chang-an contain but my ghost to keep my Empress company. Is it not strange that I should think of her now, I, who have not thought of her for many a day? Where is Yang Kuei-fei?"

General Tung bowed stiffly.

"All is ready for your departure to a place of further safety," he said. "A messenger has gone on to prepare for your arrival and see to provender for the troops. He left not long ago. Your Majesty will rest for an hour or two, until dawn?"

Han Im stepped forward and kotowed. Then he stood

awaiting orders.

The Emperor said: "Take me to her."

Han Im moved into the house in front of the Emperor, opening doors.

But Wang Wei's room was empty.

The Emperor looked wildly round him. "Where is she?" he cried.

Han Im said: "I will look for her. I left her in this room." But when he had searched the house, finding no knowledge of Yang Kuei-fei's whereabouts from the two girls or from Winter Cherry, or from a just-wakening Liu, his heart sank as he returned to the room which had been Wang Wei's. He felt the silken cord of suicide against his neck. Outside the door of Wang Wei's room he met General Tung, clearly awaiting news.

"You have not found her?" the General asked.

Han Im said: "No. Nobody knows where she is. I wonder . . . could she have gone with Ah Lai? You ask your men. I will go in to the Emperor. I feel my neck's insecurity growing with every minute. Ah well, a man can die but once."

"And an eunuch has less to lose by death than have common men," the General laughed, keeping a brave face against another man's misfortune. "I will enquire if any one saw the boy depart."

The Emperor was pacing up and down the room. He was quieter than Han Im had expected, but seemed to hold the promise of a sudden explosion of anger. He appeared conscious of his clothes and intolerant of them, as if their formal loveliness were an affront at such a moment.

Han Im said: "It is believed that the Lady Yang went forward with the advance party, by carriage."

The Emperor's wrath burst. "It is believed!" he cried. "Believed! Where is she? Tell Yen to come to me."

Han Im replied: "I regret that I am the only one of your palace eunuchs to be here."

"Then let the others be fetched, together with a ten or so of silken cords, that they may have the doubtful privilege of death!" the Emperor cried. "And bring wine. Am I, the Son of Heaven,

to stand here in a draughty, unwarmed room, pacing a wretched mat like any one of my subjects. . . ."

Han Im took his courage in both hands.

"Sire," he observed, "the great Emperor, Tang the Completer, said: *The peoples' faults are mine, and mine the peoples'.*"

The Emperor said, more quietly: "I used to listen to the wisdom of the past. Perhaps if I had listened more willingly—go and find out."

Han Im breathed again and went to speak with General Tung. The two met in the passage.

Tung said: "She went with the boy. At least, one of my men saw a girl go with him, and as the other three girls are here, it must have been the Lady Yang. Can you think why she should do that?"

Han Im replied, after thought: "She went because she feared that the soldiers would do to her as has been done to her family. I think it would be better if she had left a message. What message did she leave?"

"No message," the General said, raising his eyebrows.

Han Im shook his head. "I think she said that she would meet his Imperial Majesty at the next halt. It would be far better for her to have said so to your man—the one who saw her. I should recommend you to go in and tell this message to the Emperor."

General Tung answered: "If you think it better, I will do so. But I shall blame you if he finds that no message was actually left. We start in half an hour. It will be a slow progress, with so many of my men on foot. He will be impatient."

He went to calm the Emperor.

* * *

Liu Shen-hsu woke, and with difficulty held together the two sides of his splitting head. As he sat up, Peng Yeh came into the room.

"They are going to my estate in the time it takes to harness a horse," he told the poet. "May I extend a similar invitation to you?"

Liu demanded: "Who are going, and why?"

Peng Yeh told him. Liu's headache appeared to be passing.

"No," he answered. "Let us call it *Invitation on Waking*, an impromptu after the manner of Master Li Po.

*By a wood fire in autumn, under the leaves,
You see the woodlice, scuttling to safety,
Leaving the warm, adventurous glow of the embers
For the dark uncertainty of the darkness.
But one woodlouse hesitates, turns round,
And goes back towards the fire.
I regret that I must decline your offer."*

"Then you will forgive me if I make my own arrangements," Peng told him. He regarded poets with disquiet.

* * *

The two-horse carriage rolled noisily onward under the pale lavender dawn. Behind, the great mass of Chung-nan Mountain grew less menacing: before them ridges and spurs lay in an unbroken sequence.

Ah Lai said: "I am not very sure of the road. If Winter Cherry were with us, she could set my mind at rest."

Yan Kuei-fei replied: "Whoever Winter Cherry may be, I am sure that she would resent the mere duty of setting your mind at rest. Women are apt to aim at higher purposes than serving as guides."

A golden pheasant rose from a slope to their right.

"That is a sentence of the Master's which no one has ever understood," the boy said. "You remember? '*Thrice it smelt him, and then rose*'. Have you ever heard any explanation of it?"

She smiled. "A golden pheasant," she said, "serves as a neat direction to our conversation. You were speaking of a girl called Winter Cherry. Now, thanks to the bird, we speak of Confucius and matters literary. '*The good man*,' you remember, '*speaks seldom, but always to the point*.' It seems either that the point irks you, or that you are not what the Master would have styled a good man."

"I did not change the conversation," he objected. "It was the pheasant. But, as you wish to speak of Winter Cherry, I will

explain that she knows the road well, having travelled it before, under conditions which she is not likely to forget."

"And which I cannot forget either," she said, "since I do not know them. As to your pheasant, the line answers for itself. '*Thrice it smelt him,*' uncertain as to his purposes—to watch, to shoot, to trap, to seek its eggs—'*and then*'—having made up its mind that all men are unreliable—'*it rose*'. So anything with a bird's wildness will flee what it does not understand. So, also, your mind and your tongue flee conversation about anything more interesting than pheasants."

They turned a corner on the breast of a hill.

Ah Lai observed: "It would be easy to amuse oneself by inventing sayings which one could attribute to the Master. But, of course, it is always likely that what one says has been said before, by someone. So almost anything might be a quotation from somebody."

"Mo Ti was my favourite," she replied. "His idea that almost everything which one could do made the situation worse, appeals to some laziness in me. It is a very easy doctrine to justify, superficially at least. Here we are in comparative discomfort, jolting towards doubtful safety, while I might so easily be lying untidily in my own palace gardens after a short instant of knowledge—the knowledge of the reality of a steel blade."

"There are other deaths which rebels give to favourites," he said. "And Mo Ti did not so much, my uncle says, urge doing nothing as he urged that everything was, however disguisedly, good. Besides, Mencius put Mo Ti in a very small place, so far as philosophy is concerned. So let us speak no more of Mo Ti, but of yourself, for it is not every day that I drive with you."

She looked away, into the quickening light.

"I am a poor excuse," she said. "But for me, this trouble would not have come on my country or my Emperor. I know—indeed I know—that with me he forgot statecraft and preparation for wars. Through silken curtains the war gongs do not sound. My *Pear Garden Players* performed many a play about Emperors and favourites, but never one like this. Do you think he will come

quickly enough? I do not trust the troops."

Ah Lai countered: "If you think that I am doing this service for General Tung, without being certain that General Tung will take advantage of it, you think wrong. No: all will be well—we shall go into the distant mountains and, with fresh, loyal troops return to strike the heads from traitors. Do not concern yourself with strategy: you are a woman, and a woman's strategy is different from the strategy of men. You are fitted to be what you are, and therefore safe from dangers which afflict us. As they say, a hunchback has many advantages: he can earn a living by washing without noticing his bent back, and he is safe from the army."

"You compare me to a hunchback?" she laughed. "Your uncle would have made no such mistake."

He answered: "I did not mean to compare you, and that you know well."

They drove on. The countryside was less barren now.

Later, she asked him: "This girl of yours, Winter Cherry, why have you left her behind you?"

"You would not understand," he replied. "To you, who have always had whatever you desired, it is impossible to explain how lovers may separate without quarrels, in order to meet later."

She tossed her head.

"Who are you to say that I should not understand?" she cried. "No facet of love can go unscanned for one who loves an Emperor and is loved by him." Then, as suddenly swerving as a bird, her mood changed. "I will sing you a song." She tuned her voice to the rhythm of the wheels.

*"The cherry's airborne petals drift
In Spring, to make a veil for stars:
The fruit, in Summer, glow—a gift
That lovers mark in calendars.
In Autumn, leaves desert the tree
And spread a carpet for your feet,
Stripping to Winter nudity
The limbs that in their green deceit
Promised what woman promises—*

*Eternal youth, eternal grace,
To be for ever what she is—
A poem set behind a face.
So Winter coldly gives the lie
To tree's and Woman's perfidy."*

She stopped singing and looked at him sideways.

Ah Lai said: "To your song about Winter Cherry I can only reply with a reminder that you, too, will grow old, and that your lover, the Emperor, has grown old already. Do you (since revenge is always brutal) take pleasure in the touch of a man so many years old? Do you (since you did not spare me pain) enjoy his lack-lustre eye, his hollow cheek? Do you (since we are alone here) find in his bed the rhythm of a dance and the laughter of a light moment in unnoticed sunshine? Do you . . ."

She replied through her teeth: "Turn the carriage round."

He shook the reins so that the horses went faster. "No," he answered, "I cannot do that. I serve General Tung, and through him the Emperor. It is not my custom to take orders from a woman. Still, if what I have said is too offensively truthful, consider that only the wind has heard it."

They drove without speaking further, until, on a hill, the horses slowed. Then, as if this broke her thought, she hummed gently the old interminable driving-song.

Drop the reins on the horses back—

Ho La!

Set their course on the homeward track—

Ho La!

"There is a carriage coming towards us," Ah Lai said. "I shall ask the driver the way."

"Do so," Kuei-fei answered. The boy felt that she did not altogether welcome the interruption.

Both carriages came to rest beside a thicket of willows.

"The estate of the honourable Peng Yeh?" the driver said. He was a short, burly man. "It is not an hour from here. I myself am going after my master. News has reached us of revolts in the

Capital, and my mistress desires my master to return from the neighbourhood of danger."

Ah Lai said: "He will be following along this road in an hour or so, and not alone. I carry the Emperor's commands to your mistress, so we had better exchange carriages, for my horses are not as fresh as yours."

The man shook his head. "That is a tale," he said, "which no man could credit, for the messengers of the Emperor wear other clothes than yours. They have red kneecaps and other men on horseback with them. No—you are not the Emperor's messenger." He drew on the reins as if to move forward.

Ah Lai answered: "Your mistake is a natural one. Perhaps it would be truer to say that I am the messenger of General Tung, who is commanding the soldiers whom the Emperor brings here. I have his letter, if you will look at it."

But the driver of the other carriage made his whip whistle round his head and, as his own horses moved forward, slashed sharply at Ah Lai's. For a little while the thicket moved rapidly round him and Keui-fei, and when the horses were again on their four feet Ah Lai saw Peng's driver nearly out of sight on the road by which they had come. Kuei-fei was sitting on the floor of the carriage, laughing.

"Help me to my feet," she said. "There must be a stream in the midst of that thicket of willows. Would it not be wise to see if we can reach it, and water the horses? That will calm them, after their fright. I think I have twisted my foot."

He left her on the floor while he coaxed the horses by an almost overgrown track towards the edge of the hidden stream. He loosened their girths and let them drink. Then he tied the reins to a bush and lifted Yang Kuei-fei out of the carriage and set her down.

"You have not twisted your foot," he told her. "That is a trick which women have when they want men to touch them. I know."

She stood straight up, lovely in her anger. Then she lifted her hand and slapped him hard across the face. Neither said anything, but they could hear each other breathing. Slowly he stretched out his hand and caught hers, drawing her towards him. She took

his hand and bit it. He turned her round and put her on the grass, face down.

“So much for the Emperor,” he said.

She was still trying to slap him as he untied her girdle.

PART TWO

The lady Lia, whom men called the Lady of the Tapestry, wife of Peng Yeh, stood at the great house gate of Peng's farm at Ma Wei, watching the yellow road.

"There is a carriage," she cried. "Let all be made ready! No—stop. It is not your master. A woman seems to be driving, and she is alone."

* * *

Yang Kuei-fei reined in the horses and looked at Peng's home.

She saw a high wall of baked brick surrounding the main buildings; from the slightly greater height of the roadway she could look over this wall and notice the houses and stores which backed against it round the central, empty space. Peng (or maybe his ancestors) had not been content to leave the impression of a self-contained farm, for at the far end of the enclosure there seemed to be an attempt at landscape gardening, with rocks, stunted trees, a bridge, a summerhouse. . . .

In the main wall, fronting the entrance, three gates stood shut.

Yang Kuei-fei pushed with her foot at the sleeping boy.

"Now is the time for you to perform your embassy," she told him. "Do not let it be too obvious that I had to waken you."

He yawned and rubbed his eyes.

"I wish," he said, "that my father had not seen fit to present me with so generous a nature. Where is General Tung's letter? Ah, I have it! A little crumpled, perhaps. Drive on."

Kuei-fei shook the reins.

Peng Yeh's wife sat awaiting them at the end of the long hall into which they were brought. The two tall servants halted and stood aside. One of them said, unnecessarily: "The Lady of the Tapestry will see you."

She rose to her feet and bowed.

"In my husband's absence I must do my poor best to make up for the hospitality which he would have wished to be shown," she said. "You have come far?"

Ah Lai answered: "I have letters from your honourable husband and from General Tung, who is acting for the Emperor." They all bowed at the Imperial name. Ah Lai went on: "I have to make arrangements, with your help, for the body of men which will presently arrive with the Emperor himself. You will see this in the letters. This lady is the Lady Yang Kuei-fei, whose name will not, I think, be strange to you even here." He gave her the two letters, waiting while she read them.

She said: "You must forgive me, the two of you, for thus neglecting my duties as hostess. But it is only once in a lifetime that a woman at the same time receives orders from the Emperor and meets one so famous as the Lady Yang, so that you will, I am sure, understand."

Yang Kuei-fei answered for them: "I have often had orders from the Emperor, but I have not always shown such haste to obey them. Nevertheless, I quite understand."

Ah Lai asked: "May I speak to your stewards, to see about the Emperor's men?"

She answered: "I have no stewards. Lo Chin, go with him and do what he says." When Ah Lai and one of the servants had gone out, she went on: "You will honour me by coming to our part of the house? You must be tired after your journey. Men are expected to do such things without feeling tired, but with us it is different. Father Peng is sleeping now. You shall meet him later. My son is out on the farm, but my two daughters will make it their pleasure to see to your comfort."

"It is good to know that you have your father living," Kuei-fei answered, as she made to follow the Lady of the Tapestry. "The climate must be healthy. But your name . . . Was it given to you in youth, or have you gained it by prowess with the needle?"

She followed the other through passages towards the women's quarters, marvelling as she went that the sturdy figure before her was the centre and hub of the house, that everything round her was

controlled by that capable mind, and that she, an Emperor's mistress, should feel for the first time awkward in the house of another. She finally put it down to a return to the sort of house in which she had been born, before they had taken her away to Chang-an. Values here were very different: the soil and its products loomed larger here than in the artificial atmosphere of the Palace. She felt a little homesick.

The women's quarters, as they should be in a well-run house, were very separate from the remainder of the buildings. The Lady of the Tapestry led the way to the eastern wing, past servants pursuing their duties without obvious displeasure, into a room where two girls sat sewing.

"These are my daughters," she said. "The eldest is not here any longer."

The taller of the two girls had risen and bowed, followed by her sister. They stood waiting for their mother to speak.

Kuei-fei said: "It is all very different from what I have experienced for a long while. There are space—and time . . ."

The Lady of the Tapestry said: "They work as the seasons dictate. They tend their silk-worms, weave silk, dye it—perhaps embroider. I am myself fond of embroidery. You will have heard the name by which they all call me here. I do not object, for in the making of patterns I find delight. But I must not keep you here, looking at my insignificant daughters. If the eldest had been here, now. . . . I will show you your room." She was wondering if her hasty messenger to her son, telling him to keep out of sight and remain in the village, had done his duty.

Kuei-fei found it utterly impossible, in this atmosphere of peace and productive work, to explain how she came to be on her way with the Emperor to exile in the western provinces. It seemed wrong, somehow, to obtrude considerations of politics and the necessities of palace life upon this scene. The quick fingers of the girls, the quiet, the slowly swinging reed curtain, the distant noise of house activity, filled her with almost a sense of shame, and she followed without speaking. The girls sat down again to their work.

* * *

Lo Chin, though tall, was spare. He babbled to Ah Lai as they walked.

"I have seen forty summers and five more," he was saying, "and I have always served this family. It is a pity that my master was not here to welcome you."

Ah Lai said, shortly: "I have met him, and look forward to meeting him again. That is all the family, counting the son, who is on the farm?"

Lo Chin replied: "There is, of course, Peng Lao, who sits and writes poems in his room, yonder where the little bamboo is planted. We call him Father Peng. At least, I hear that he writes poems, and sometimes one may see him at his door, saying words to the air, as if someone were listening to him. What is the good of saying words to the air?"

"I must pay him a visit now, if only for a moment," Ah Lai said, for he had been well schooled, and knew the deference which is not always paid to the aged. "You must introduce me. My family name is Kuen and I am a nephew of the poet, Li Po."

Lo Chin bowed as he walked, and Ah Lai wondered how he managed it. They came to the door by the little bamboo plant, and Lo Chin went in first, halting inside the door and performing a full kotow. Ah Lai could hear his voice as he spoke.

"This is the honourable Kuen Ah Lai, who has come to see you, sir. He is the nephew of the great poet Li, and begs the privilege of speaking with you."

There was a great todo inside the door, and Lo Chin backed out, still bowing. Father Peng followed him, with great sleeve-flapping after the manner enjoined by Confucius, bowings and handshakings inside his sleeve, as he cried: "Alas, that I was not told of the arrival of the nephew of so famous a man as Li Tai Po!" He used the society name of the poet. "Had I but been aware of your footfall on the threshold, I should have come before, but this stupid fellow leads you to my door instead of giving me the opportunity of coming, myself, to greet you!"

He retired backwards through the door, still bowing, and Ah Lai had to follow the wizened figure, whiskered, white-bearded, the

bright button of his cap bobbing at every step, as he vanished into the darker room.

Here, while he made the conventional difficulties about sitting down first, Ah Lai had leisure (since his politeness was almost automatic) to notice the single scroll on the wall, the cedar chest under it, the porcelain stools, the high *k'ang* bed at one end and the small table bearing writing materials, from which the old man had clearly risen only a moment before. On this table lay a sheet of rough paper on which three lines had been written in the style of the spider.

"I try to occupy my time so that no harm shall come to posterity from my activities," the old man said, when they had finally seated themselves. "I saw you glancing at my unworthy effort of to-day."

Ah Lai said: "Poetry can never harm posterity. If it could do so, it would not be poetry. My uncle also spoils paper."

The old man replied: "Your uncle is famous in court and hovel. Wherever men have learned to rise above the level of the beasts, his poetry is known. To meet you is an honour which overwhelms my white hairs. Have you anything of his with you?"

"I regret that we parted yesterday in too much haste for me to ask him for a scrap of verse to elevate my mind while travelling," the boy answered. "But I see that you are lacking one line of a 'stop-short', unless I am mistaken in your metre." He indicated the three lines on the table.

"An unworthy outpouring of an old man's complaints," the other said. "Besides, I see no prospect of ever achieving the fourth line. If you would care . . ."

Ah Lai accepted the paper and read:

*My son has set apart this room for my use:
My son's wife brings me broth in a steaming bowl.
Alas, this kindness has made me homesick.*

They sat for a minute, looking at the lines together. Then Ah Lai said: "I would make *this* in the first line into *a*, and (with your permission) conclude with a sombre thought."

Old Peng agreed: "Yes, *a* would improve it. Poems should always

be as indefinite as is consistent with clarity. You remember the Master's *If language is lucid, that is enough?* But what of your sombre thought? Can you be more precise?"

The boy smiled. "It is not for me, who have so few years," he said, "to suggest to you, an accomplished poet. But, if you insist . . ."

"I insist," Peng answered.

Ah Lai repeated the poem and added a line.

*My son has set apart a room for my use:
My son's wife brings me broth in a steaming bowl.
Alas, this kindness has made me homesick
For a house of tough planking—six feet by two.*

Father Peng rose to his feet and bowed.

"Sir," he said, "I am in your debt. After this I shall never dispute that literary ability is inherited."

Ah Lai laughed. "I am only my uncle's nephew," he answered. "And now I must leave you, for I have the Emperor's horses to see to."

Indeed, as he was making his last ceremonial bow to Father Peng, he heard the confused noise of men and horses, and knew that the Emperor was within bowshot. Hastily he ordered Lo Chin to throw open the great central gate and unlock the store houses. Then he went to stand in the road and appear to be ready. He was conscious of a gnawing at the pit of his stomach, which told him, if he needed the telling, that he had not eaten for many hours. But this gnawing was soon only at the back of his mind, for he had never yet seen an Emperor's Guard in all the splendour of their tossing plumes and red kneecaps, the slung bows and the high proud action of the horses, the bright glint of sun on steel (for it was the hour of the serpent, and again his stomach reported its presence to him) and the shouting round the single carriage in the midst of all these horsemen.

The Captain of the Guard and General Tung rode up together, dismounting at the gate. Peng's wife had come up beside Ah Lai, and he could see that she was searching the figures before her for

that of her husband. As Ah Lai watched her, Peng Yeh himself galloped round the flank of the horsemen and dismounted beside her. The horse on which Peng Yeh had ridden was sweating.

Peng Yeh cried in a loud voice: "Welcome to my poor house. All is the Emperor's to command, as all land is the Emperor's, and all men his." He went on in a quieter voice: "My wife, get out of the way. This is no place for women. Busy yourself elsewhere."

Ah Lai saw, too, that the Lady of the Tapestry did not resent these brusque words—if indeed she had heard them—but that her eyes were filled with relief that her husband had returned safely to her. Ah Lai marvelled again at the sense of values which women exhibited on the strangest occasions. He would soon be able to eat a meal.

Then the Emperor's carriage drove up, without halting at the gate, and swung to a standstill in the main courtyard. Some of the guard rode in beside it. They all kotowed as the Emperor descended from his carriage.

He asked: "Where is Kuei-fei?"

There was a murmur amongst those of the guard nearest. General Tung and the Captain of the Guard looked at each other. Then Yang Kuei-fei came from the women's quarters and kotowed too. The Emperor seemed to forget the others, and went to her at once. Han Im, coming from outside the gate, stood near.

This time Ah Lai heard quite clearly the remarks which the Captain of the Guard made to General Tung behind his hand.

"Lovebirds watched by a freemartin!" he whispered.

* * *

The day ended. The troops had been dispersed to barns, store-houses and other buildings in the nearby village. Only the Emperor and his suite, with General Tung, the Captain of the Guard and a small number of trusted men shared the security of the farm. The gates were shut and guarded: the last long light of the sinking sun fingered down the slope of Ma Wei and picked out the inequalities of the walls of mud bricks, the shadowed recesses by the gates, the red, tiled roofs of the buildings within.

In the Hall of Audience the Emperor, Han Im and Yang Kuei-fei sat over a meal.

"Peng is a patriot," Han Im was saying. "I believe that he would have placed the Hall of Ancestors at our disposal if we had asked for it. You can picture him saying: 'My ancestors served you while they lived: dead they can still serve you by providing a roof for your Majesty'."

Kuei-fei added: "But he would not have welcomed me to his Hall of Ancestors. He looks at me as if I were not there. Do you think he can be wholly trusted?"

Han Im observed: "He can be trusted to serve the Emperor and therefore to serve you, not directly, perhaps, but to serve you nevertheless. His servants can cook well." He eyed a plover's egg on his chopsticks, then put it into his mouth. "Very well," he ended.

The Emperor seemed pensive. "I am tired," he said, "but not too tired to wonder what General Tung will decide to do. He, also, does not like to have women about."

"I am sure that there is still danger," Kuei-fei said. "Sometimes I think it would have been better to have stayed at Chang-an."

"If you had done that, I should have stayed also," the Emperor told her. "They dislike you, Kuei-fei, because they attribute to you such military defeats as we have lately had. To you and to you, Han Im."

Han Im replied: "They may so attribute defeats, but their thinking (if thinking it be) is the thinking of a man who sees geese flying into the setting sun and believes that the sun is flying from the geese. There are other eunuchs who have dabbled in politics, but not I. To me, politics are a distasteful form of activity, for I have no desire to rule others."

"Tung says we shall go to Szechuan," the Emperor said. "I wonder how long he thinks it will be necessary. This rebel, An Lu-shan, will he gain or lose adherents? A Hun . . . my people will not willingly follow him."

Han Im ceremoniously held out to the Emperor the dish containing plovers' eggs.

"These," he observed, "are good enough to prise our minds from our difficulties."

In the Women's Rooms, the Lady of the Tapestry picked up her rice bowl, spooned it half full of rice, added two pieces of fried bean-curd and a bunch of bean-sprouts, dipped her chopsticks in the sauce-boat, and then paused pensively.

"I was keeping those plovers' eggs for your father," she said.

Her younger daughter, Pen Mooi Tsai, stopped eating. "You did not put them all out," she said. "Besides, we can get more. I think that the Captain of the Guard is very handsome."

Her mother replied: "Possibly. But you have only seen twelve summers, and you are affianced to a boy in Lo-yang, so you must not think of such things. I wonder where your elder sister is."

"Still at Chang-an, I suppose," the girl answered.

The Lady of the Tapestry frowned. "How many times," she asked, "must I remind you that you have but one other sister, your sister Mei? It is true that there was another, but, as you say, she went to Chang-an, and she is no longer your sister, really. Besides, I said 'elder', not 'eldest', so you should not have made the mistake. Where can she be?"

Mooi-tsai replied: "The Emperor must be a great strong man to want such a number of girls. I wish you had let me see him, instead of keeping me in here. I think I hear my sister Mei outside the door. She seems to have someone with her."

Peng Mei, a little taller than her younger sister, came in and said: "There is a girl here who came with the Emperor's men. She had nowhere to feed, so I brought her in. She does not speak."

Mooi-tsai went on eating, but she turned her head to see who it was.

The Lady of the Tapestry looked at the girl as she stood within the doorway. Then the Lady of the Tapestry rose to her feet. Her voice was calm.

"Come with me to my room," she said. "Mooi-tsai, when you have finished your bowl, bring mine and another for our visitor. Do not forget the chopsticks, nor the sauce. Mei, start your meal." She led the way to the adjoining room. When they had gone in she put her arm round Winter Cherry's shoulders and said: "Do not tell me, if you do not want to. Now, now, crying will do you no

good. Still, my jacket is an old one. Put your head here. You must finish before Mooi-tsai reaches the bottom of her bowl. There, there!"

She patted Winter Cherry's shoulder again, and Winter Cherry's sobs became less noisy.

After a little, they stopped.

* * *

Father Peng, General Tung, the Captain of the Guard, Peng Yeh and Ah Lai sat eating with the disquiet of men who know that knowledge is not shared between them.

Father Peng held out his rice-bowl and observed: "Mencius said that the good man is not mean to his parents. My rice-bowl is empty."

Peng Yeh apologised and filled it. "A man's duty," he said, "is first to his family, then to his Emperor. If I have extended too much care to the second, I beg the first, in your person, my father, to forgive me."

General Tung and the Captain conversed in low tones. Ah Lai could catch only snatches of their talk, so he edged imperceptibly nearer to listen.

"What was I to do with the impertinent fellow?" the Captain was asking. "If the Kingdom is, indeed, governed by eunuchs and the women of the palace, what is that to him? He gets his pay."

Tung observed: "Punishment for such indiscipline would seem essential, if the remainder are to be loyal. For if one question the ultimate authority, the others cannot, seeing him unpunished, be relied on. I know that you are short of men—that every soldier is precious. But soldiers are of no use unless they obey unquestioningly. This man should die, as an example to the others. I see no other way. Better to have ten trustworthy men than ten thousand forever wondering if you have given the wise order."

The Captain said: "To-morrow."

General Tung replied: "No. To-day. But come—let us ask the opinion of one who has seen many more moons than we, whose judgment will thereby be the sounder. You agree to abide by his

decision?" As the Captain nodded, General Tung went on, addressing Father Peng: "Sir, I beg to submit a question for your decision. Will you favour us?"

Father Peng said: "I must know all the circumstances. To see a stone in a brook is not to know the brook: to know the brook only, is to be ignorant of the ocean. What is your problem?" He sat up straight on his stool. "When I was sub-prefect at Hwa Lu, I had often to solve problems."

General Tung said: "I should have guessed that you had exercised government, but I confess that our present troubles had put reasonable thought from my head. So a man who is ill forgets his manners. The State is ill. Our problem is this. One of the guard said to his captain that since the Empire is governed by eunuchs and the women of the palace, he did not see why he should sacrifice his life to save these irresponsible rulers."

Father Peng pondered. Then he said: "You have not told me all. Such an attitude on the part of a common soldier implies either madness or a long period of misgovernment on the part of his superiors. As to the charge which the man made, that does not concern him. It concerns his superiors. But it would be best to have the man here, in order to question him."

The Captain went to the door, opened it and called. Then he came back and sat down.

Father Peng said: "I have been remembering the advice which the philosopher Mencius gave, when King Seuen came to him with a similar question. Something like this: 'When your intimates say that a man deserves to die, shut your ears. When your high officials say it, shut your ears. But if the common people say it, see the man, judge his case, and (if he merits it) execute him. This is the origin of the saying that a man should only be killed by the people.' You see? Ah, this is the man?"

One of the guards entered, with two more behind him. He was unarmed. He bowed to Father Peng.

"To an old man, courtesy," he said.

The Captain ordered: "Repeat what you said this morning."

The man began: "My name is Seuen. . . ."

Father Peng whispered: "A coincidence!"

The man continued: ". . . and I have been in the Guard for ten years. When I first served, all was well in the State. Peace at home vied with the reputation for military skill over the borders."

"He talks well," Father Peng said. "Go on."

"At this time," Seuen went on, "the Emperor"—they rose and bowed—"held his court at dawn. Then Yang Kuei-fei came, and there was no more dawn court. The schools and libraries which the Emperor had ordained languished because he took no further interest in them. It was then that the men of the Guard began to talk politics. Everyone talked politics. The eunuchs gained power. You could get anything by paying money. And now, Chang-an is in the hands of the rebels and we guard this woman as she takes the Emperor away to safety. It is not a man's empire that we have now. That is why, this morning, I questioned an order. That is all which I have to say."

Father Peng said: "We are told by the Master not to underrate a man because of his words nor to hold what he says in small esteem because it is he who says it. Nevertheless I think that it must be pointed out that in thus voicing your opinions on politics you are stepping outside your trade. In spite of the modern carelessness of thought it yet remains true that every building starts from the ground, and therefore I would contend that before you are qualified to speak of the influence, Imperial or otherwise, of Court ladies and of eunuchs, you must prove your ability by demonstrating the soundness of your acquaintance with the art peculiar to the soldier. I refer, of course, to tactics." He raised an eyebrow in the direction of General Tung and the Captain, and was rewarded by gestures of assent.

"There is no fault to be found with your contention," the General agreed, "in so far as I am qualified to judge."

The Captain said: "Yes."

Seuen complained: "It was ever so. A man of the people, like myself, dares to take the liberty of thinking, only to find himself enmeshed in a net of words which render him helpless as a trapped duck. What you have said, sir, is made of beautiful sounds, of

echoes from the past, and of quotations from great men. In this net I am not able to move. But if you feel it necessary to award to me the punishment of listening to these words, I am very grateful."

Father Peng said: "If that is so, do not talk but listen." Linking actions with his words, he continued: "These chopsticks which I lay here represent a ridge. This sauce-holder at the northern end of the ridge, represents an enemy city. The magistrate of this city has put his troops, these melon-seeds, astride the ridge south of the city. Here. Your commander has twice as many melon-seeds, archers, cavalry and footmen, who have just reached the southern end of this ridge, thus. What would you expect your commander to do?"

Seuen replied, hesitantly: "I cannot decide."

Father Peng enquired softly: "And why?"

Seuen was silent.

The Captain observed: "I should not expect my men to be able to answer such a question."

General Tung asked Seuen: "Can you answer this question?"

Seuen replied: "I can give an answer to the question, but I have no means of knowing whether my answer would be judged correct."

Father Peng observed, apparently addressing himself to a silk scroll on the wall above Seuen's head, and very much to the latter's embarrassment: "When I had command of men I first read such books of military history as my circumstances permitted. I then sought information and advice from such of my friends as had studied the art. When I had gained this objective, I took with me a small number of men and moved them about the country, imagining always that their passage was prevented or imperilled by the wisdom of an enemy commander superior to me in all but fortune. Only then did I dare to engage my men in real combat. The Master has said that to lead an untrained force into action is equivalent to throwing them away. The word 'untrained' applies reasonably to commander as to soldier. The duty of the commander is to command, while that of the soldier is . . ." He stopped, then said suddenly: "What is a soldier's duty?"

Seuen replied immediately, without thinking: "To obey the orders of his commander."

Father Peng said softly: "Yet you queried an order." He laid his hands upon the table, palms upwards.

General Tung said to the Captain: "Tell him to go and wait."

The Captain of the Guard gave the necessary orders to the two men who were by the door. When Seuen had been taken away General Tung said: "I am not familiar with this situation. It has not occurred in any of the military histories which I have read. Would you do me the incomparable favour of resolving it for me?"

Father Peng began: "It is contained in the records of an obscure campaign of five hundred years past, during the Han Dynasty, in the neighbourhood of the city of Heng Tsin, not far from here. The defending troops were under the command of the magistrate of the city, while a certain rebel general, known as Tiger Lu, rode at the head of the southern forces. It is an old problem. One is compelled to decide whether to attack on the right, centre, or the left. There is only one answer—the centre. I need not trouble you with the reasons for this decision, other than to point out that the man on the lower level is always at a military disadvantage; and therefore the ridge had to be occupied, and that, once astride the ridge and on a level with the defending forces, it is useless and indeed foolish to waste both time and energy in descending from the ridge with any part of one's forces. If I remind you that he who rides on a tiger cannot dismount, straining the metaphor perhaps, you will understand why. Alas! I have now altered the problem completely, since it would appear that I have eaten two-thirds of this excellent southern force, that the armies are now equal, and that in the absence of the man Seuen (who must certainly be executed tomorrow since he exhibits the most dangerous of all characteristics in a soldier—the ability to think for himself) I find that the motive power behind my thoughts, the incentive to military analysis, has vanished as completely as those unfortunate men whose bones lie scattered here upon the table. Besides, I have hardly heard anything lately from your own lips."

General Tung and the Captain of the Guard rose to their feet,

bowed very low to Father Peng, and went out to their temporary quarters.

Peng Yeh and Ah Lai, each feeling that too much had been said for comment to be tolerable, went out also, bowing as they passed.

Father Peng sat on in the still, unwavering light of the lamps, fighting over a half-remembered campaign, and decimating the opposing melon-seeds quite impartially.

* * *

It was late in the first watch—the hour of the dog. Ah Lai, as he came out of the bright lamplight, found that he could see nothing at all of the buildings round him save the glimmers of light at the oiled windows of living rooms, the clear-cut, corrugated outline of roof-ridges against the almost imperceptible violet of the sky, the veiled suggestion of stars which some high haze made seem mysterious and, away towards the village, the gentle glow of two campfires fitfully smudging the northern sky. Before him a blacker gap opened in the black rectangle of sheds and storerooms which served as a boundary to the little formal garden beyond, and through this blacker gap he walked, his feet uncertainly feeling their unaccustomed way, towards the little summerhouse which he had seen in daylight beside the miniature and useless bridge. He went to the summerhouse, felt distrustfully for the plank seating which should run round its enclosed sides, and seated himself, prepared to indulge in what his mind would have considered a pleasant quarter of an hour's analysis of his own position.

It was, he assured himself, a pivotal date. Hitherto he had but been at the whim and wish of his uncle's fancy: now, if the hints of General Tung meant anything, responsibility would enter. His mind, effortless in the friendly dark, slid easily over a boyish past, through adolescent experiences which his uncle had curiously encouraged, over hunting expeditions and literary evenings and through the narrow, welcoming, scented doorways of blue houses. And had all this, he mused, in any way fitted him for this sudden growing-up, with its unwanted accretions of responsibility, its right to direct the lives of other men who (his innate commonsense

assured him) were probably far better qualified to direct their own? He reflected on the cause of this change, on the sudden realisation with which he had first seen Winter Cherry at the Porcelain Pavilion, and on his irrational but quite instinctive and immediate decision that she, without either knowing or intending it, had disrupted the easy flow of events and (since a poet's nephew might be permitted a metaphor) had scattered the stars of surprise, or, alternatively, had set them swaying drunkenly upon the not-long-ago smooth, dim, surface of his life's stream. Ah well, what had to be, had to be, and Winter Cherry seemed to have served her purpose only in compressing into a narrower space of months—or was it days?—his undoubted transformation.

Then he realised, even as his eyes became more accustomed to the dark, that someone was breathing within a foot of him and heard Winter Cherry say: "I am sorry that you did not know I was here, but I could not get out."

After a few thumps his heart resumed its normal beat, and he said: "I did not know that you were there, but it is possible that the curious spirits of the land may have brought our thoughts together, for indeed I was thinking of you and of how you had changed me."

"This is my home," she said, "but, even so, I do not think that you and I should be sitting together thus in the dark. I had been thinking, also. Do you know that only my mother recognised me when I came?"

He laughed softly, surprised at the pleasant suggestion of his own laughter. "I thought that you, now that your troubles and your honours alike are over, would not too clearly remember what brought us together. In my experience of women I have always found them ready to forget any inconvenient service which has been paid them, such as the service which my uncle and the eunuch Han Im paid you when they helped you to run away from the palace at Chang-an. If you have been thinking, as you say, I judge your thoughts to have dwelt upon a welcome return to the routine of a woman's duties, a routine which in spite of its lack of excitement provides for you the alternative to the soft delights of palace life."

"That was not my thought," she answered softly. "I was thinking

that you, now, . . . Hush!"

Voices were coming towards them. Ah Lai could see nothing of the speakers, and Winter Cherry sat motionless beside him.

One voice said: "Then we shall tell them to-morrow. Such a woman as she is cannot be allowed to live. We must trample her under the horses out there, on the slope of Ma Wei."

The other voice replied: "What you suggest is very dangerous, but if the opportunity is not seized now, the opportunity will pass. The case of the punishment designed for the fool Seuen is as good a one as is likely to arise. And, if she is killed as well as that fat eunuch Han Im, then we shall at last have a government of men."

The first voice went on: "Perhaps it will be enough if we kill only the woman. Eunuchs, unlike girls, can be made to see sense. Yes, we must do it now. The Captain of the Guard and General Tung can recognise truth when their noses are rubbed on it, and it is the duty of every loyal man to do for the Emperor what he has been prevented from doing for himself by reason of being woman-ridden."

The speakers moved off and their voices joined with the gentle movement of the wind.

Ah Lai said: "'Woman-ridden'. That is the talk of madmen."

Winter Cherry did not speak, but he was surprised to find that she so far forgot the rules of behaviour as to touch his sleeve gently. From the living rooms a voice sang, just audibly, a song of the Han campaigns.

Ah Lai said: "Life is a campaign, and to him a joyous one. I do not feel to-night that I could ever say to you again the things which I said to you at the Pavilion of Porcelain, but I do not regret having said them. I meant them then, and I am not of those weak ones who veer and back like a lake wind in autumn. Nevertheless I am very tired, and I am going to bed now. I am so tired that for once I am quite content to leave to the military officers the problems which it seems will confront them. You, too, must be tired. Let us bid each other good-night, for if we fell asleep where we are now it might lead to pleasant but awkward misunderstandings. Walk well. If I have seemed to say nothing which was expected of me, you may

ascribe that merely to fatigue. Had it been otherwise, I would have spoken otherwise." He rested his hand for a moment on her shoulder, felt her shiver at his touch in the warm night, took away his hand and rose to his feet. "I was not at my best to-night," he said as he left her.

Winter Cherry did not for some minutes rise from her seat in the summerhouse, but when she did she was still conscious of his touch upon her shoulder, as a delightfully remembered thing which unbalanced the rhythm of her heart and made it difficult for her to set her mind firmly on what she knew that she had to do on the morrow. Then she went back to her own room.

When Yang Kuei-fei came to the room of Winter Cherry, the girl was sitting on the bed at the end of the room, lost in thought. She started up when Kuei-fei came in, as habit dictates to a minor star when the moon sweeps into the sky.

"You are thinking," Kuei-fei said, sitting down on the bed and motioning Winter Cherry beside her. "Do not be shy, girl—you and I are in no very dissimilar circumstances. Disaster sniffs at our heels, like a mongrel bitch."

Winter Cherry replied, sitting down: "Yes. Even when I am awake I seem to be sleeping. I have been so ever since . . ."

Kuei-fei said: "He sent for you, that last night. I was angry with that, for though I did not want him myself, I grudged him to you. Yen told me of it."

"I had to go," Winter Cherry told her. "Han Im fetched me. His Majesty talked a great deal."

"Some men," Kuei-fei answered, "have need of women to hear what they have to say. Such is our Emperor. I know that it seems disheartening to serve merely as a waste-box for words, but you must remember that I have known him for long, and that in years one gains an insight into failings and virtues which is, by the ignorant, called love."

Winter Cherry did not reply at once. Then she said, slowly: "I do not wish to think that any man whom I loved could become just a literary habit. But I suppose that, when you come to know them better, men seem very ordinary. That is a thought which I should

prefer to put behind me."

They sat without speaking for a while. Then Kuei-fei observed: "We women who have known a man for a long time are apt to seem not so much patronising as unimaginative, to you who are in the first flight of emotion. It is, I assure you, only a protecting screen to our real feelings. If we regret the passing of romance and take refuge in superficial cynicism, we do so only to conceal (even from ourselves) that our hearts are being slowly but surely ground to powder by the disillusionment born of experience, by the dull colours in which habit can paint what was once inspiration."

Winter Cherry replied: "I do not think with so many words. I do not strive to spear my meaning on a hair-pin. And I think that I, who shared the honour of the Emperor's couch not so long ago, should be spared this talk of love, which I begin to suspect is not a frequent visitor to that couch."

Kuei-fei said, seriously: "What matters is what a girl means by the word 'Love'. Love, to me, means each of those unforgettable moments when personalities are centred to a fine, glowing point, and these two points play, like amorous fire-flies, in the dark which is the rest of life. At such moments words are spoken which even the speaker hardly hears, but words which are kept unstained and undistorted through a hundred of later-lived moments. Thus I remember our pledging each other . . . Why am I saying this to you?"

Winter Cherry did not speak.

Kuei-fei went on: "On the night of the double seven, in the Palace darkness, we were to be two, mating, one-winged swallows—two limbs of a single tree. That is the sort of pledge which we women remember."

"No man has ever said that to me," Winter Cherry said. "But I think that one man once meant it. You will not think me wrong if I tell you? We are both in my father's house, and I do not feel here as I felt at Chang-an."

"Go on," Kuei-fei told her.

Winter Cherry continued: "When His Majesty slept, I ran away to the Porcelain Pavilion, because the poet, Li Po, had been kind to

me earlier. Han Im followed me, as he said was his duty. But those two could not, between them, have prevented the wall of sorrow which swept over me. I should have killed myself. There was a boy, the nephew of Li Po, and he said things to me which made me forget my sorrow and what I felt should have been my shame. I cannot remember exactly what he said, but I did not want to kill myself any longer."

Yang Kuei-fei did not urge Winter Cherry to say more. She sat still, on Winter Cherry's bed, thinking of Ah Lai and of how easy it had been for her to bend him. And, accustomed even as she was to conquest on easy terms, she felt a little sorry to have streaked the bright surface of young love by a momentary and tawdry delight in capture. She knew that this regret was quite unlike her, and that it would probably pass almost at once. And yet she felt something of the sensation of one who has lightly laughed during the Great Sacrifice. She could not clear her mind of this common dross of compunction. What could she set up against Winter Cherry's simpler yet sublimer love? You smash a vase, and the potter's graceful thought lies before you in a thousand pieces. You stir the mirror of a pool, and though the ripples subside, the mirror is never quite the same again, afterwards. Was her life really so important, even to herself? Even to the Emperor? And why consider the Emperor now, when all her life had been spent in considering herself?

She brushed at a speck of dust on the back of her hand and got up.

"It must be comforting to love like that," she said as she went out, leaving Winter Cherry still sitting on the bed, thinking of Ah Lai and the Pavilion of Porcelain.

* * *

Han Im, on his mat in front of the door of the room in which the Emperor was sleeping, woke at a touch and realised that he must have been dozing. Father Peng was at his side, making motions with his finger to enjoin silence.

Father Peng said: "Take this sword. It was mine." He put into Han Im's hand a beautiful ivory-hilted weapon, sheathed. "Men

have been talking outside my window. They are going to take the Emperor's favourite on to the slope of Ma Wei hill and trample her under the horses. I am fearful that ill should come to his Majesty—the woman does not matter. You are younger and stronger than I, or I would offer my own services to him. Take this and use it. Not for the first time will it be drinking a rebel's blood." He crept away and left Han Im with the sword. Han Im belted it on and got to his feet. As he did so a slip of bamboo bearing rapid characters caught his attention. It had been lying by his head on the rough pillow, and he recognised Winter Cherry's writing.

Kuei-fei must take my place with my mother until the Emperor has gone. I know that he loves her, and I am doing this for him. It will be quick. Winter Cherry.

Han Im moved swiftly towards the room where Yang Kuei-fei was sleeping and opened the door. A single lamp was burning in a corner; by its light he saw, first, the two porcelain stools which had rolled to one side of the room. One had broken into three large pieces. On a little table lay Kuei-fei's hair-comb, broken very deliberately into halves, side by side. Through the oiled paper window the faint light of early morning gleamed dully.

He took the sword from its sheath and touched the taut bow-string. It gave out a deep low note. He cut it, and the girl's body fell to the floor. She must have broken her neck when she jumped from the stools, he thought, for Kuei-fei's face was still beautiful in death, without the red, sullen flesh which Han Im had seen in the faces of others who had thus solved with a bow-string the problems which were too strong for them. He lifted her head and cut the gut of the bow-string where it touched her throat. The sharp sword cut also the fine skin of her neck, but no blood came out.

Han Im threw the girl's body over his shoulder, put the sword back in its sheath and strode out into the light of the expected sun. Somewhere outside the farm walls he could hear the noise of horse-men in movement. In the courtyard a groom was adjusting the girth of the General's horse. Han Im stepped up to him and put Kuei-fei's body over the saddle. Then, as he put his own foot in the stirrup, the groom took him by the arm. Han Im swung himself

into his seat behind the body, drew the sword and with one movement, from the height of the horse's back, cut down through hair and skull. The groom fell, and Han Im, flogging the horse with the flat of his bloody sword, moved out of the open gateway on to the slope of Ma Wei. So, he thought, many an Emperor's messenger had urged his horse. But this was no Emperor's message. The world was in ruins. Han Im only knew that, somewhere out there, amidst the slowly wheeling mass of horsemen moving like ghosts in the dawn, Winter Cherry was trying to take the place of the girl whom she thought the Emperor loved.

Winter Cherry, gaudy in the robe which she had taken from the room of the sleeping Yang Kuei-fei early last night, wearing in her short hair the king-fisher hair-pins, walked on, towards the line of horsemen. It would be quick, she thought. One crash, and blackness. She hoped that they would not look too closely at her body afterwards, for some fool might see that they had killed the wrong girl. Still, the clothes and the famous hair-pins should convince men, if they did not look too closely. If Han Im could only keep Kuei-fei quiet at the farm until all this trouble had passed, until the Emperor, back from this journey into the further provinces, should, returning, meet her whom he loved. She remembered the Emperor's face, at the time of their first meeting—pale, other-thoughtful, remote. Even later he had still seemed so, even when he had fallen asleep beside her and she had crept out to freedom and . . . to what else? Who was she, to alter the ways of the Gods?

Then she stopped walking, for from one flank of the horsemen a figure moved fast towards her, a figure somehow familiar, with a burden at his saddle-bow. At the same time another horseman, whom she recognised as the Captain of the Guard, rode more slowly towards her from the centre of the line of horsemen. He and Han Im met beside her.

"This is Yang Kuei-fei," Han Im said. "She has killed herself. The other is a fool girl called Winter Cherry, who thought to alter the will of the Gods. So she dressed herself in the other's clothes. . . . Help me, quickly. We shall say that I came to kill the Lady Yang mercifully. Then do with me what you will. Only, that the

Emperor may be comforted—for he would not have liked this—your men had better ride over her body thoroughly. Then the marks of the bow-string will not be seen. Good, the girl has fainted. That makes easy what before would have required words of explanation. Change their clothes.”

The two horses from which they dismounted served as a screen from the ring of horsemen. Soon Yang Kuei-fei lay on the ground in her own robe, the king-fisher hair-pins in her hair. Han Im swung Winter Cherry where the other girl's body had been.

“When I have restored this girl to her parents,” Han Im said, “I shall be at your pleasure.” He mounted behind the unconscious girl and rode off, back towards the farm. As he rode, he thought how long it was since he had felt a horse's saddle between his knees. He thought, too, of other things which he had not felt for a long while. Winter Cherry opened her eyes, and he patted her on the shoulder as he rode.

“Go to sleep,” he told her. “The Gods were too strong for you.”

Behind them, clearer now as the light rose, the line of men formed into two ranks, then into four. Thus, in four waves, the line moved forward stirrup to stirrup with gathering speed. Ahead of them a coloured patch lay in the grey dust. The horses in the first rank tried to avoid it, but those of the second, following closely, had no time to do so. Nor the third, nor the fourth. Then they wheeled about and cantered back over the same ground.

* * *

When Han Im reined up the horse in the courtyard, he found General Tung standing waiting for him beside the groom's body. General Tung said amusedly: “You take my horse, you slay my groom, and then you bring back the beast in a lather. It seems to me that an explanation is possible.”

Han Im answered, as he stood Winter Cherry on her feet: “The explanation is a simple one. This girl tried to take the place of the Lady Yang, not knowing that the Lady Yang had hanged herself. I found the Lady Yang's body, came out here and borrowed your horse. The groom tried to hinder me, and as time was precious, I

took what steps you see."

"But for a eunuch to carry a weapon," the General protested, "is a contradiction in terms. Have I not seen that sword before?"

Han Im replied: "It was given me by Father Peng, who had overheard the conspiracy and felt that I, a younger man, was more fitted to cope with action than he. Also, I felt that your soldiers were more likely to listen to me, in their present rebellious mood, if I bore with me some form of argument."

"And this groom, Seuen?" the General asked.

"It seems to me," Han Im answered, "that he, the cause and centre of the conspiracy, at once its focus and excuse, could best pay by his death for the privilege of having written history. Besides, you will see from this girth, which is indisputably slack, that Seuen, whatever else he may have been, was not a good groom."

General Tung observed: "Yet, at a time like this, all men are useful. We are short of officers. The rebels are moving towards us, and we, therefore, move on before them. I should value your co-operation, if only"—he laughed—"in return for the loss of my groom. And now, girl, you can go and tell the Emperor of the death of the Lady Yang. None of us dare do so. Tell him that we move in the time it takes to prepare his carriage." When she had gone, he went on to Han Im: "We must find you a horse, suitable for your weight. Come."

* * *

"You must keep the sword," Father Peng said to Han Im, "for it will be used in the service of our Emperor, and I am too old to use it myself. You are younger: you have no distractions to take your mind from the duty of a soldier, as have ordinary men. Study of the military art demands a wholehearted attention. Women divert the minds of generals from the correct disposition of their forces, so that they become more skilled in scaling a bed than in attacking a city."

Han Im replied: "I have led a soft life. The affairs of the palace have claimed my attention: my muscles are not as hard and tireless as a soldier's should be. And yet, when I felt my knees on the horse's saddle this morning, when the wind past my ears sang a song of

action, I was once again my younger self. Perhaps with exercise and training . . .”

Father Peng nodded: “You will find no difficulty once the mind is fixed.”

Han Im answered: “I trust that you are right. The Master says: *To lead an untrained army into battle is murder.* But he also observes that *it is pleasant to learn by persistence and effort.* I may take both these sayings to myself.”

Father Peng gave him a number of writings in his own, clear calligraphy. “These are my notes on tactics,” he said, as he bowed Han Im out.

* * *

In his dream, the Emperor moved uneasily. He was hunting, following in his carriage the assembly of men who advanced over the great Park at Chang-an towards the game driven to them by the beaters. In his hand the bow, in his fingers the arrow, ready to the string. Towards him came the first of the beaten game, a hare. In long leaps it covered the ground, and he fitted the arrow to the string and made to draw the bow. Ever nearer the hare lolloped. The officers on each side of him loosed their arrows, but not at the hare. The hare was his. Then, as it came so close that he could see its harried eyes, the hare suddenly fell in its tracks, struck by no arrow. The horses avoided the dead hare, as horses will, but the wheel of the carriage passed over it, and the Emperor, calling out with hoarse throat, awoke.

Winter Cherry stood before him.

“She is dead?” the Emperor asked, without expression in his voice, and sat on his bed.

Winter Cherry, taken unawares, said: “Yes. You knew?”

The Emperor was silent for a moment, his fingers tearing at the edge of the rug on the bed. Then he answered (and his voice was so low that she could hardly hear it): “I had a dream. How did she die? No—do not tell me. In my dream the wheel of my carriage passed over her body. I could not prevent it. I was hunting . . .”

Winter Cherry said: “It was quick. You need not fear that she suffered pain. Now you must prepare for your journey, for word

has come that An Lu-shan has moved from the Capital towards us. Your carriage is being prepared."

"I would rather die here, with her," he answered, "but by so doing I should lead others to their death, too. So I must go, as you say. But my heart is empty, and I move without my own wish, like the branches of a tree in the wind. When I visited the home of the Master, Confucius, and attended the sacrifices for Lu Dukedom, I saw that my own death would follow. And it is not I who die, but she! The brightness of our lives has faded, her loveliness will never again colour my eyes. Can I see her?"

Winter Cherry helped him to put on his outer clothes.

"I do not think there will be time," she said, mothering him.

"Do you, too, ride to the West with me?" the Emperor asked, with an unaccustomed humility in his voice.

"That is for you to say," she replied. "I belong to you."

He answered: "Nothing belongs to me. No one belongs to me. You are free to go and to come, as you wish. If you so desire, you may return to your father's house."

She kotowed, and left him, going to the great hall where the tablets of the ancestors of the Peng family were ranged on long black-wood tables round the walls.

* * *

Peng Mooi-tsai moved silently along the passage with her bowl of hot broth. As she went she reflected on the unwisdom which her elders showed in trying to keep a girl of twelve ignorant of what went on all round her. True, such supposed ignorance was a part of the system to which everyone seemed accustomed, and she could hardly blame her parents for doing what all other parents seemed to do.

Of course, Mooi-tsai thought, she would be punished for what she was doing now, and her filial duty made her quite sure that the punishment would be justified. But if her eldest sister had been taken away as a palace-girl for the Emperor, why was it necessary to cover all this with a veil of silence? Was it not honourable to be one of the Emperor's house? She remembered the tears which had

seemed never out of her mother's eyes when Winter Cherry had gone away, and the almost fierce instruction to be doing something useful when she had asked a reason for this immoderate and prolonged sorrow. And she could have comforted her mother, then, so capably . . . Her sister Peng Mei was not nearly so able to say the right thing.

It could not be so very wrong to serve the Emperor by bringing him hot, good broth.

She pushed open the door and tiptoed in, creeping towards the bed.

"Your Majesty," she whispered, a little overcome by the occasion, but using the extreme formality which she had come to associate with Emperors, "would like a bowl of broth to defeat the morning chill?" She was a little proud of the phrase "defeat".

Ah Lai opened one eye and looked at her in the gloom.

He said: "I seem to have slept no longer than the flutter of a butterfly's wing. Is it already morning?"

Mooi-tsai replied: "The sun is just showing. I hope that the broth is neither too hot nor too cold, your Majesty."

Ah Lai realised that the mistake might prove amusing. His back was to the light, and he kept it so. "Who are you?" he asked, in the voice of an older man.

She said: "I am called Peng Mooi-tsai. My father is Peng Yeh, and my mother is called the Lady of the Tapestry. I am twelve years old, and have two sisters and one brother. I name the sisters first, since the fame of the Lady Yang Kuei-fei has made that the fashion."

He looked at her as she knelt there with the broth-bowl in her hands, and saw how like a younger Winter Cherry she was. Her long plaited hair was bound with the red cord of an unmarried girl, and her eyebrows owed nothing to her own art. Her garments were of a quiet dove-blue, her collar cut high.

"You are only twelve?" he asked. "I should have thought you older."

She replied: "My sister is older, and my elder sister older still. Will you be pleased to drink the broth, your Majesty?"

Ah Lai replied: "Set it down, and stand up. There is no need for

you to behave in my presence with such extreme formality. Why have you brought me this broth?"

She answered him: "My eldest sister is a palace-girl. My parents and my brother and sister think that I am ignorant about it, but I am not. It is a great honour to be taken into your palace, as Winter Cherry was taken. I should like to go myself and see the great buildings, the parks, the famous men who move about your Majesty, the poets and the singers . . ."

"There is nothing worth while to be seen at an Emperor's palace," he told her, and saw her disappointment. "You need not think that I am telling you that in order to deceive you: it is true. Men, there, are just men like everybody else—more anxious for fame, perhaps, more seeking of personal advancement. Life there is a shallow shell, not to be spoken of in the same breath as this life here, close to the earth, under the bright skies and the rain of heaven. You are fortunate to be what you are. You surely did not hope to follow your sister?"

She replied: "That would be too much to hope. But wherein is she better fitted to entertain your Majesty than I? I can sing a little, and play the lute, and even dance. She can only play a flute, and that not very well. Yet they took her. And now she has come back here, to her home, with your Majesty. They think that I do not know that, either, but then they never expect me to listen at doors, so that I heard Winter Cherry and my mother talking when Winter Cherry came back. Why is my sister not here with you now? Do you not want her any more?"

"You would not like to be a palace-girl," Ah Lai told her. "You are put with many other girls in the Pepper Rooms, to be looked after by old women and eunuchs, and then, very seldom, you might be sent for by the Emperor when he picks your name, usually by chance, from one thousand others, and a eunuch carries you in to the Emperor wrapped in a swansdown quilt but with no other clothes at all, and leaves you to the Emperor. Would you like that?"

"If your Majesty wishes it," she answered. "But could I not come in myself, without being carried, as I have come now? Besides you speak as if you were looking on at the Emperor and me. Why do

you speak of the Emperor as if he were someone else? You . . .”

The door opened, and Han Im, the sword still belted on, brought in Winter Cherry.

Han Im said: “This girl was trying to get herself killed in place of Kuei-fei. She did not know that Kuei-fei had hanged herself with a bowstring. Fortunately I was in time. But you had better get up and prepare to ride, Ah Lai, for we move on. News has come that the rebels are moving after us from Chang-an. Is this the girl’s sister? Then she can look after her while you get ready to ride with the Emperor. Your duties must be considered before your pleasures.” He went out.

Peng Mooi-tsai said: “So you are not the Emperor? Of course, I can see you now that the light is better. I would not have spoken so if I had known how young you were. You should have told me at once. And how did you know all that about girls carried being in to the Emperor?”

Winter Cherry took Mooi-tsai by the hand and led her out.

Ah Lai dressed himself with care, for not only was he to ride into the far west in the Emperor’s train, but it was still possible that, in the interval before their going, he would have the chance to explain to Winter Cherry why he had been innocently deceiving her sister. It was of no use now, but he might manage to see her alone.

* * *

Winter Cherry knelt before the tablet of her great-grandfather in the Hall of Ancestors. It was quiet here, and a thin column of smoke rose straight into the still air from the little pile of sandalwood which she had put in the burner.

“Do you, my ancestors, make of me and my desires what is best for the honour of our family. I have been honoured in the bed of the Emperor, and now the Emperor flees before his rebel enemies. I have been honoured in the declared love of Ah Lai, and now Ah Lai rides to his death in the Emperor’s service against these rebels. I have tried to save the life of the Emperor’s beloved, the Lady Yang Kuei-fei, but in vain, for she is now crushed beneath the feet of the horses, her garments are stained with blood and dust, her king-

fisher pins are trampled underfoot, and the glory in the Emperor's eyes has gone, leaving an empty space.

"Do you, my ancestors, guide the spirits of the earth and sky towards whatever doom they may purpose for me, for I have failed my father and my father's father, and from me no fame has come to the house of Peng.

"Do you, my ancestors, give me some sign that the end may not be far off, that shame shall not always smear my name and through me the name of my family, and that the end, again, may be near. Give me a sign."

Outside, the stillness was broken by the hoofs of horses, and the doorway into the Hall became suddenly bright and then dark again.

Ah Lai said, as he stood there: "I am going. I thought that you would be here. How straight the smoke goes up."

She replied: "Are you my sign? Are you the sign that I was praying for?"

"Your ancestors must have heard you," he said. "I did not know that I was an answer to your prayer, since for long, it seems, you have not looked at me as once you looked. But if prayers bring me, here I stand, about to go again."

She cried, still kneeling: "Can I believe the sign?" The smoke wavered, became again a ruled line to the dimness above. "Can I believe? It matters nothing if the past has been cruel, if I can believe."

Ah Lai moved towards her as a voice called from outside: "They are going!"

Winter Cherry said, very softly: "If you were not going . . ."

He cried: "Believe the sign."

Then the door opened and closed a second time, and Winter Cherry was alone before the tablet of her great-grandfather.

She cried, noiselessly.

* * *

The Lady of the Tapestry sent a messenger to recall her son from the village, now that Yang Kuei-fei was dead.

■

*The shuttling sun, the weaving moon,
Inscribe the warp and weft of time,
Determining our calendars
(If life shall be a curse or boon,
If Love shall speak in prose or rhyme)
Upon the pattern of our stars.*

PART THREE

As when the players, masked and posturing, have reached a climax in their play by death, disaster or incongruity, and the main agents of this climax leave the stage to a subsidiary character whose outpourings of verse serve to sooth the tried nerves of the audience, so then the sweet succession of the season brought relief to the family of Peng. The millet was garnered, the granary floors stood deep once more in their coloured grain, and the activities which lead directly to the hoped and following spring engaged the minds as well as the bodies of those who had witnessed the passage of an event.

The men of An Lu-shan passed in pursuit, taking with them nothing but more grain in little bags at their saddle-bows. Returning messengers brought tales of the ever further retreat into Shu in the west, and ever continuing pursuit by the men of An Lu-shan. He, report had it, filled the court at Chang-an with tall Northerners from his own province and Borderers from the deep, cold hills of the North. Rumour had it, too, that his mind was not wholly concerned with the pursuit and destruction of that Emperor whose throne he now held, but that the usurper troubled himself greatly with the fate of that companion of his youth who had (so it was reported) fled with the bright Emperor towards the unprobeable and misty valleys where magic seemed so much more likely than in the prosaic and cultivated plains around the old capital city.

It was on the eighteenth day of the seventh moon that the Emperor and his party reached Cheng-tu. Ah Lai, who had been used hitherto only to the inadequate organisation of a poet's household, was immediately astonished at the manner in which efficiency overrode expected fatigue and the various members of the party were accommodated in houses, while the soldiery tested further the capacity of the barracks.

For several days, it appeared, there would be no particular need for his services, and when he had largely exhausted the pleasure of acquainting himself with the geography of Cheng-tu, he began to realise why officials in general kept bright the armoury of their poetic imagination and often, towards the fall of the sun, would relax in putting on paper their impressions of the day that had gone.

But when he had collected paper and brush and prepared his ink, he found that his creative faculties were under a cloud which he could not explain. Rhymes were tardy, words seemed to lack by a narrow margin that precision which is any poet's aim, and even the titles which he had managed to project did not comfortably fit any poem which he was likely to write. Images, indeed, arrived, but they were images with loose edges, images not only unrelated to each other and individually incapable of extension into a poem, but images whose reality, even whose possibility, seemed outside normal experience.

He was, therefore, grateful for the interruption when, at the hour of the goat (an unheard-of time for an audience) he was summoned to the Governor's *yamen*, where the Bright Emperor had been installed with a poor semblance of the grandeur which he had left at Chang-an. Yet even here formality overlaid necessity, and when Ah Lai had come past the armed, statuesque guards at the gates, to the entrance of the Great Hall, he found there all the unexpressed official hindrances and supercilious condescensions which are a part of any court, however rural—hindrances to which Ah Lai had not yet had time to become accustomed.

Nevertheless he waved his written authority under the noses of the guards and ushers and finally heard the great doors close behind him. The sun was halfway down: a shaft from the windows above the door cut across to the rectangular wall facing him, hanging in the air a beam of dancing motes whose end seemed to rest on the patch of brilliant light head-high in the contrasting darkness of the empty wall before him.

Han Im's remembered voice said: "Turn to your right, walk ten paces and face to the North." The voice seemed to come from the left, where Ah Lai knew that the Emperor would sit, as Emperors

had always sat, their backs to the high lands of the border tribes, their faces to the warmer country of the black-haired people of the hundred surnames.

When Ah Lai had obediently done this, he saw that he was not alone, for beside him, cross-legged on the tiled floor, a Taoist priest sat. The long, coarse pin through his untidy hair, and the shapeless, brown robes of his order seemed in strange, undeliberate contrast with the shining buckles and glinting weapons of the guards, with the tall sacrificial tripods against the Eastern wall, and the four peacock-feather screens which moved, ever so slightly, in front of the throne before him. Only the base of the throne was visible: Ah Lai subconsciously wondered how such a throne had been found here in Cheng-tu, where no Emperor or king had sat since the dim days of the later Han dynasty. The peacock-feather screens seemed to have been brought from some dusty store: they bore no resemblance to the twice seventy-eight which, at Chang-an, drew colours from the air in a shifting spectrum of green and blue.

Nobody spoke. The bearers of the four fans lowered them towards the door. The Emperor was coming. Ah Lai, amused, saw the moving feet below the fans. Then the four fans were lifted and their bearers returned to their places by the two walls. The Emperor sat, revealed, upon his throne. A faint point of light played on the gold nail-covers of his left hand. The rest, seen through the sun-beam across the hall, was dark, was magnificence not visible. The Emperor spoke, broodingly.

"We have published an edict, recognising the poverty of Our virtue, regretting the ills of Our country, admitting that Our choice of officers was not wise, authorising the Heir to the Throne to undertake attacks upon Our enemies, and proclaiming an amnesty for prisoners. Our sorrow is great."

Again there was silence: the motes danced, unheeding, in the sun-beam.

Han Im, near the throne, suddenly remembered his duty and intoned: "The Emperor has spoken."

Then the priest, still sitting cross-legged, said: "To state the truth, when the truth is plain, is riot enough. To favour the Way of

Tao, to transcribe in a new edition the works of our Master and to publish a commentary on the Classic of Filial Piety, are not enough. To seek for the Elixir of Life is not enough, though you have done all these things. It is the heart which matters."

Ah Lai felt that he was more a spectator than ever in his life. Two thoughts strove for mastery in the darkened hall: he watched their strife.

The Emperor went on: "It is easy to silence for ever voices such as that."

The priest replied: "The voice may be silenced, but the truth remains."

Suddenly, horribly, laughter came from the Emperor. He cried in a loud voice: "We simulate here all Our old ceremony, and a priest sits cross-legged, listening without being impressed. Should We be happier, were We that priest?" Again he laughed. "We do not dare, because We dare not understand. We do not understand, because We dare not dare."

Han Im said: "Sorrow rides your Majesty hard."

The Emperor replied: "It is not sorrow. It is frustration. Here We must plan, and issue edicts and send messengers. There, outside this hall, the people of the hundred surnames suffer. Of what avail is it to them that We should hold Our throne?"

The priest said: "You trust no one."

The Bright Emperor answered: "We trust no one. Whom should We trust?"

Han Im reminded him: "Sire, there is the matter of the safety of the city of Sui-yang. Your Majesty was considering it."

Irritably, the Emperor said: "Well? Must I sorrow and plan together?"

Then the priest rose to his feet. He appeared tall in the gloom. He said: "To put 'I' for 'We' is a beginning. Whom did you wish to send to Sui-yang?"

"What is it like not to fear me?" the Emperor asked.

The priest replied: "It is like listening to a sick child. Yet even Confucius told us that if we hear the Way of Tao in the morning, it matters little if we should die at night. Perhaps he did not mean

the Way of Tao, but his own Way. But you should not fear death, you of all men, for to you above all others is granted the continuity of family, of succession, of a tended tomb. We are they whom history passes by."

Han Im observed again: "Sui-yang, Your Majesty?"

"Tell the boy," the Emperor answered.

Han Im said: "His Imperial Majesty has decreed that to you, Ah Lai, should be given the honour of a mission. Instructions and authority are written here, on this paper. Guard them with your life."

Ah Lai stepped forward and walked up the interminable floor. In front of the throne he kotowed. But before his forehead had reached the floor for the second time, the Emperor said with a kindly note in his voice: "Stop. Rise. You helped me once. Do not imagine that I forget so easily."

The priest had moved up noiselessly beside Ah Lai.

"Does the lad desire to undertake this mission?" he asked. "Why did he help you before? Was it for your own sake, or for another's? Do not in one breath thank him and ask for more favours. He may not want to go on this mission."

Han Im asked, scandalised: "Shall he be removed?"

The Emperor shook his head. A gem in his headdress turned from green to red, then apricot, as he moved. "The priest is right," he said. "I talk much of the sorrow of my people, but I have not yet learned to consider their desires. I am old to learn. Boy, do you wish to do me this service?"

Ah Lai answered: "If I must be honest, as this priest is honest, I must say that, when I served before in taking the Lady Yang to Ma Wei with General Tung's orders for the reception of his troops, I did so because I wanted adventure. Further, there was a girl who was better left alone for a space. So I went to Ma Wei. But now to travel to Sui-yang, for whatever cause, seems to be but to place a greater distance between myself and this girl."

Han Im said: "She would wish you to go. Further, if you write a letter, it can be carried by another, through the lines of the enemy. You must serve your Emperor."

The priest said: "Must? All the ills of the world lie in that word. Even Confucius said he would have no 'must' in his ideal State."

The Emperor rose to his feet, impatiently waving aside the bearers of the fans. "The whole of my Empire is bathed in blood because men give orders and other men obey them," he cried. "And now the loyalty of Sui-yang is to stand as a bastion against the enemy's forces, and again there will be blood everywhere. I will issue no more orders. Han Im, come."

The priest and Ah Lai were left alone in the great hall. The fan-bearers vanished through another door. The sunbeam was more level now, but the motes still danced.

Ah Lai said: "I thought that to oppose the Bright Emperor, or even to query an order, was to die. But you are not dead. I am not dead. Life is strange now. Before, we knew what to expect."

The priest replied: "He is whimsical. Also he is sad because of the Lady Yang, whose family have ruined the State, if ever there were any so simple first cause. Come, let us go to your lodgings. Read the orders which you were given. Maybe they fit with your own desires. It is always easier to take the line of least resistance."

* * *

Later, when Ah Lai had read the Emperor's orders in his room, he said to the priest: "I should wish to go to Sui-yang. But . . ."

The priest told him: "If you have read your histories as I expect you to have done, you will have sensed that when any such great events as these thrust themselves on man's consciousness, he says with convinced optimism: 'Now, after this, it is impossible for anything to be ever again the same. We start afresh from now. No longer shall we make the same mistakes, for we are wiser.' And then he goes out and marries a wife or buys a horse or writes a poem, just as he would have done had no great events come to hinder him."

Ah Lai replied: "Yes, it is as you say. But you have spoken of commonplace actions which we men do in spite of the great events which pass over our heads. I, too, am concerned with those commonplace actions, or at least with one of them, for in the stress of the Emperor's service I have left behind me in the Capital (or,

rather, near it) a girl for whom I have an affection."

The priest said: "Fevers and the worship of women come upon us unawares, and even wise men cannot avoid them."

Ah Lai went on: "I saw her first when she was full of the sorrow which overtakes a girl when she has known for the first time what it is to be taken by a man. He was an old man, and she found this made her unhappy. Also, she did not love him. So she ran away, and it was then that I found her. She would not listen to what I had to say to her, and I did not find that unreasonable, for her mind was full of the picture of the old man, so that all her thoughts were coloured by him, and I feared that she had lost more than her maidenhead. Nevertheless, I knew that I loved her, and I think that she is not unmoved by the thought of me. Then I was compelled to come on here, in the Emperor's train, and had, so, to leave her with hardly a farewell. I do not know what has happened to her: I do not know if sorrow has passed, nor if she would now listen to me. So I proposed to write a poem for her, so that she might know what I feel. And how am I to send this poem to her? I am to go to the key city of Sui-yang, to gain first-hand impressions for the Emperor of the possibility of defending it. The Emperor does not trust the judgment of military men in military matters, for he believes them to be prejudiced. So he sends me, a civilian, to dig for truth. Nevertheless, if I go to Sui-yang, I cannot take letters myself to Chang-an. Besides, the rebels are there, as Han Im said, and I could not pass through their lines to her."

The priest said: "Then that difficulty is easily settled, for I can carry your letters for you. A priest can pass through battling armies unnoticed. It is true that I had not contemplated going anywhere near Chang-an, but if I have a duty at all it may be done there as well as here. You have friends in Chang-an?"

"I know only of two girls," Ah Lai answered. "Their names are Honeysuckle and Clear Rain, and anyone in Chang-an will help you to find them. You mean that you would carry my letter to Chang-an and these girls could take it further? But surely I am relying too greatly on the kindnesses of others—on your kindness and the kindness of these girls. I know only one of them at all well, and

that was the accident of a summer night."

The priest replied: "I will take your letter. You may rest assured that I shall persuade the girls to deliver it. Now you need talk no further. Rest to-day. Write your letters. I shall come to see you early to-morrow morning, before I go, by routes which you need not know, back to the Two Capitals."

Ah Lai sighed with relief to see how circumstances again bent themselves towards him, bowed to the departing priest, and drew writing materials towards him. With the beginnings of an appetite, he began to set words in order for a poem which should show Winter Cherry how he still felt.

* * *

It was then, three months later, between the period called Cold Dew and the period when Hoar Frost Descends, at the hour of the dog, Peng Yeh and Father Peng sat before a small table. The remains of the evening meal had been removed. A yard further from the table the Lady of the Tapestry sat, so that she might be referred to, instructed and even, perhaps, consulted in the council-of-family which Peng Yeh purposed. A lamp stood on the table: two rush-lights on the walls made the rest of the room dark.

Peng Yeh said: "It is time for me to consider the circumstances of our eldest daughter. I have thought on this matter and come to a conclusion. I wish, my father, to hear from you how this conclusion appears to you. It will then be for us to instruct my wife accordingly."

The Lady of the Tapestry did not speak. She sniffed just audibly enough for her men folk to hear her. Neither gave a sign of having heard.

Father Peng said: "When I was your age, I consulted my father before coming to conclusions. But you may be right. Let me hear your conclusions and the considerations which led up to them."

"The girl is no longer in the fullest sense my daughter," Peng Yeh said. "When a girl has passed out over the family threshold, whether it be to marriage with some suitable young man who has been chosen for her, or to the more honourable state of a girl in the

Emperor's palace, she has ceased to be, fully, a daughter. She no longer ties a red cord round her plaited hair. Her clothing and feeding are at another's charge. The father does not still have to be opening his coffers for the expenses which girl-children bring with them."

Father Peng agreed: "It is as you say. But if the husband dies in poverty, the girl comes back."

"Not of right, but only of compassion," Peng Yeh returned.

His wife murmured, tentatively: "If . . ."

They both turned to her.

She continued: "If the husband is dead and there is no money after paying for his burial, it would be folly for the wife to go her husband's family, since they would certainly attribute his death to her neglect, or to some circumstance which would make her visit to their roof (for more than a very brief time) into a source of recurrent sorrows and memories of the son which they had lost. No, it is in her own father's house that she should find refuge." Then she added: "She should find refuge there even if she is so changed that only her own mother recognises her."

Father Peng observed: "Since her husband is not dead, and since I can hardly imagine that the Emperor, constrained as he is by the presence of a usurper on the throne, would again welcome my insignificant grand-daughter into a household which must be in a difficult situation . . ."

Peng Yeh smiled. "We have, indeed, been discussing something which was beside the point," he said. "But the affair is unprecedented. The girl is neither married nor unmarried. I considered this as soon as you told me of her secret coming, and decided that the balance lay on the side of her being unmarried. I therefore, since we are by now used to doing without her, looked round for a suitable match—a family to whom I might send the official go-between with the confidence born of social equality."

The Lady of the Tapestry stirred uneasily. Then, taking courage, she said: "The girl seems happy here. She is useful, and does not constitute a drain on our resources. Her fingers are nimble with needle and loom. After all that she has been through, would it not

be possible to leave her here a little longer?"

Father Peng asked: "What does the girl herself say?"

They both stared at him in surprise.

Peng Yeh cried: "But surely you do not expect me to ask my own daughter about her future? No one ever heard of such a thing. To consult her would be to rock the foundations of the Empire. Why, even the Master . . ."

Father Peng interrupted, a little testily: "What Empire? It seems a little unsteady already. And as to the Master, though I have spent a lifetime reading his works and trying to live them, I have found no instruction of his which would urge you to arrange the girl's future with a view only to your own convenience. *The good man, you will remember, thinks first of others, then of himself.* I trust that you have done nothing definite in the matter of the go-between?"

"I have not yet sent the go-between to the Ching family," Pen Yeh replied.

The Lady of the Tapestry forgot herself enough to interrupt without invitation. "The Chings!" she cried. "Why, I thought that everyone knew that the Chings depended for their revenue on the silk imports from the district of Shu, and that the present fighting has cut that revenue down so far that the Chings have had to borrow money. I do not think . . ."

Peng Yeh, in his turn, interrupted. "I did not desire your opinion of the Chings," he said. "Money is not everything. Birth . . ."

Father Peng suggested: "Let us hear the girl. We need not be influenced by what she says."

"Then why ask her?" Peng Yeh complained. "But it would be best to settle this matter, in whatever way, speedily. My wife, you will fetch our daughter."

The Lady of the Tapestry rose obediently to her feet and went out of the room.

Peng Yeh began: "Really . . ."

Father Peng raised a restraining hand. He said: "Remember the Master's dictum that *we should respect our juniors until, in age, they are no longer respectable.*"

Then they both sat silently until the Lady of the Tapestry

returned, bringing Winter Cherry with her. The girl remained standing: the Lady of the Tapestry took her seat again.

Peng Yeh began: "You should have greeted us formally, for you can see that it is a formal meeting."

She replied: "I am sorry that I failed in my duty."

Father Peng murmured: "*To have faults and fail to correct them—that is indeed having faults.*"

Winter Cherry kotowed.

Peng Yeh said: "I am your father. I wish to hear what you have to say about a matter which concerns you."

Winter Cherry replied: "You know, my father, what is best. It is not for me to have any opinions . . ."

Father Peng interrupted again: "Girl, it is of no avail to behave as you think we expect you to behave. If a girl leaves her home and goes to the Capital—if she has the honour of the Emperor's presence—if her days are full of glitter and poetry, of rich food and unaccustomed manners—it is not possible for her to return to her parents and say 'I have no opinions'."

She answered: "Sir, I did not say that. I said that it was not for me to have opinions."

Peng Yeh cried: "Why quibble about words?"

The Lady of the Tapestry observed under her breath: "Because words have meanings."

Old Father Peng's keen ears heard her voice and divined her meaning. He said, nodding: "Yes. The Master told us that *if language is lucid, that is enough*, and the meanings of words are part of the lucidity of the language which uses them. Why, I wrote a poem about it myself, this morning." He pulled a sliver of paper from his sleeve. "Listen.

*I see your lips move
I hear the rustle of your eyelids.
Do not say that you have not spoken
When I know what is in your heart.*

It is not in my usual style, I know. Just an idea while I was sitting with the late sunlight on my knee. A memory from before you were

born. But it illustrates my meaning."

Winter Cherry exclaimed: "So you know, too?"

Father Peng replied: "It is more difficult not to know, if one has lived at all. You young ones are apt to regard the aged as a dried fruit-peel. The peel was not always dry. Now, tell us, girl, what you want done about yourself. Let there be an end of this having no opinions. Why, even your mother was not deceived."

"Even?" said the Lady of the Tapestry.

Peng Yeh laughed.

"When my father takes charge of a conversation," he said, "everything turns upside down, like the guests in Li Po's poem about the Porcelain Pavilion."

Winter Cherry said: "I ran away, after I had been sent for to the Emperor. He was asleep, and I went to the Pavilion because Li Po had been kind to me when he was drunk, earlier, in the low-sunned garden by the Aloe Pavilion."

Her father and mother clicked their tongues. Father Peng smiled and rang a little bell on the table. To the servant who came he said: "Wine."

They all waited until this had been brought. Father Peng turned the little silver cup in his hand.

"It is a dissolver of doubts," he said. "Drink, all of you. And girl, fetch a porcelain stool and sit down with us. Daughter-in-law, draw up your seat. Son, relax that look of discipline. Now, drink!"

In a little while they were all talking freely, and Winter Cherry had told her story.

"And when he was about to drive away," she finished, "he told me that I was as free as if I had never left my parents' roof. But I did not like to tell you this, my father."

Father Peng said: "Freer, for you are no longer ignorant, but must be consulted. Of course the best thing would be for you to go into a nunnery, but you might not like that." He sipped a fresh cup. "Son, you can give up your ideas for her future. Let her stay here, as if she had not gone. Then things will settle themselves—probably in a way which you would not have foreseen."

He rose to his feet and set down an empty cup. The others,

rising, waited for Father Peng to speak further, but he nodded, tucked his poem carefully inside his sleeve, and went to his own room.

Peng Yeh, with a motion of helplessness, went out too.

The Lady of the Tapestry said: "I thought your father's plan might prove impracticable. Your grandfather thought so, too, when I told him yesterday. You left your embroidery in my room this morning. Some of the stitches will have to come out. I will show you."

They went out together.

The four empty wine-cups stood on the table.

* * *

Peng Chan-mu leaned against the doorpost of the women's room, watching his three sisters working. His youngest sister, Mooi-tsai, compared his stocky, robust figure, hardened by toil and toughened by weather, with the remembered slighter build of Ah Lai, who seemed to have in his appearance a little of his uncle's poetry, while her brother undoubtedly suggested something much more earthy.

Chan-mu said: "Still pretending to work? It seems that you three girls recognise the need for justifying your existence."

Peng Mei answered: "At least, we work. You stand against the door-post as if you were afraid that it would fall down."

Mooi-tsai said scornfully: "He is thinking. That is hard work—for my brother. That is why he has to have support for his back."

"Support for my back!" Chan-mu cried with scorn equal to hers. "Indeed, you, who sit here softly, making soft things for posterity, are qualified to talk of supports for the back! So I, labouring in the fields day in and day out, am a weakling, while that ornamental poet's nephew who was here, who never spent his strength in honest toil, is laudable—is to be held up as an example to us, just because our eldest sister has learned what I can only call a palace attitude."

Mooi-tsai leaped to her feet, letting her embroidery fall, and sprang towards him. He raised his foot and pushed her with it, not too gently, in the stomach. She went backwards, tripped and fell

on her back.

"Don't you adopt the palace attitude, too," he laughed. Then Mooi-tsai got up again in a temper, and her two sisters joined her in the attack. Chan-mu pushed a stool in front of them, slipped through the door and went out, singing.

Mei said: "He is ill-bred. He learns his manners from the men on the farm."

Winter Cherry added: "And the animals."

Mooi-tsai asked: "What did he mean by the words 'palace attitude'? I did not understand. And when I fell on my back he said it again. Did he mean anything?"

"Nothing that you ought to understand," Winter Cherry told her. "Come—we must put the room in order again before our mother sees it. Did he hurt you when he pushed you with his foot?"

Mooi-tsai shook her head and joined in tidying up. She was still puzzling over her brother's words, and decided to ask her mother at the earliest opportunity what they meant.

* * *

In Chang-an, towards the far end of East Street, past the food-shops and silk-cutters' establishments which served their immediate needs, the three Blue Houses stood side by side separated only by narrow passages leading to gardens and stabling behind them. Mother Feng ruled (as far as she was allowed) over the middle house of the three. On a clear morning just after the period when Hoar Frost Descends, Honeysuckle could see from their high room clear over the low buildings at the opposite side of the street, away to distant hills about which she sometimes made poetry which she never wrote down.

Just now, Mother Feng's form broke the view, and Clear Rain, waking lazily, heard Honeysuckle saying: "If you will allow me to see my favourite view of the hills as well as yourself, Mother Feng, I shall do my best to listen carefully to what you have to say."

Mother Feng cleared her throat, as if at an audience, and then, irritated that she should have done so, replied: "I brought you the

message because the priest who brought it gave me money to take it to you personally. Money is not so easy to come by, these days, where rebels take for nothing what men used to pay for in good, bright silver."

Honeysuckle asked: "What was the message?"

Mother Feng replied: "That, he would only give you himself."

Clear Rain laughed. "Then he has paid you for nothing," she said. "Tell the priest to come to us. Is he a follower of The Way, or merely a follower of Fo?"

"I do not know," Mother Feng answered. "I shall give him your message. Then you can ask him yourself. But priests do not wash much, and you may not enjoy it. I . . ."

"Let him come," Honeysuckle broke in. "He can always go again."

Mother Feng went out.

When the priest came, they saw at once that he was a follower of Lao Tze, whose Way has puzzled some and been an excuse to many. He sat down on the floor without speaking. His hair was carelessly wound round on the top of his head and stuck through with a long wooden pin. Bright, deep eyes shone in a lean, lined face: his fingers were long and dark.

The two girls looked at him in silence.

"With regard to women," the priest said, looking straight in front of him, "I follow the philosopher Chuang-Tzu."

Honeysuckle observed brightly: "That was, I suppose, entirely due to your mother."

The priest's eyes opened wide with joy, and he said: "Here is one after my own heart! I speak to her of philosophy and she turns it to a pedigree. If I had given her a pedigree, would she have become philosophical?"

Clear Rain rose to her feet and stretched herself lazily.

"Other men," she said, "bring rich presents in return for the privilege of listening to us. One can only conclude, therefore, that what we say is valuable. Yet here you are enjoying it without making a return."

The priest replied: "Chuang-Tzu, waking after a dream in

which he thought himself a butterfly, wondered whether his dream were the reality and he the dream. So fickle and evanescent are thoughts, dreams, and also the words with which these dreams are shared. And, if words be dreams, then it is three stanzas of dreams that I have brought with me. These dreams were written by a young man who paid me money to deliver them, apparently thinking them worth this outlay. But he gave me no other money with which I might have arranged for the further transport of these words to the lady to whom they were addressed. This places me in a quandary, and a quandary is not only bad for the digestion, but upsetting for the soul. You must solve it yourselves."

Honeysuckle replied: "You spoke of a young lady to whom your dreams were addressed. Unless you tell us the name of this lady and produce the dreams of which you spoke, then indeed we shall be *wagging our tails in the mud*, like the tortoise that disliked responsibility."

Clear Rain corrected her: "Tail. There was but one tortoise."

The priest said: "I see that you both know the Books, and will no longer conceal from you that the name of the lady's family is Peng, and her given name is Winter Cherry. Here are the deceptive lines."

He took from his sleeve a crumpled piece of paper and gave it to Honeysuckle. Then he rose to his feet and said: "To speak words at parting is a weak confession."

As he was going out, Clear Rain called after him: "Yet you have spoken them. Besides, may we know your name?"

He replied: "I am called the Guardian of the Hidden Spring," and went out at last.

Honeysuckle opened the paper.

Ah Lai had written:

The priest who brings this travels to the North and then to Chang-an. If you go to the farm at Ma Wei, I am sure that you will be treated with hospitality. This on the back is for Winter Cherry. I can never think of you without hearing the rustling of water-lilies.

Clear Rain commented: "Is this not more your affair than mine, sister? After all, I hardly saw the boy when I was there."

"And I," Honeysuckle replied, turning the paper over, "am not, it seems, the object of this exceedingly erudite poem, for it is addressed to the girl Winter Cherry, whom I last saw wearing her short hair without particular distinction. Listen to this."

She read:

*The millet bears a thousand-fold
Upon its panicked support,
Filling the granary with gold:
Beside the ordinary sort
There are the black, the red, that yield
No smaller harvest from the field.*

*The bamboo flowers once, and dies
As other, lowlier grasses do;
It serves as paper for the wise,
And basket work: in garden, too,
It binds and stakes the heavy fruit,
And men can eat its tender shoot.*

*So many aspects has my love
That I can never list their names,
And you, who know it yours, above
All other and contesting claims,
Shall gather in the harvest when
The summer-time swings round again.*

Clear Rain sniffed: "A gardener's catalogue of hum-drum events, bereft of unexpected charm."

Honeysuckle replied: "Apart from the purely instructive part, it seems promising. From what I know of him, that young man will have some difficulty in living up to his professions. From what I know of him, his backwardness in deeds may prove hard to forgive, when he writes words like these. But he is a pleasant youth, and no doubt practice will narrow down the space betwixt promise and performance."

"You ought to know," Clear Rain answered, so that Honeysuckle threw the nearest thing at her. "I suppose that you want to

experience again the delights of stealing a man."

Honeysuckle said: "She lost nothing which time cannot replace. Yes: I think you and I might go to Ma Wei. It will be a change from this, whatever Mother Feng may think."

They set to planning how they might have their journey at another's expense, and finally sent the maid Cinnamon with a letter to the Palace.

* * *

When Cinnamon came back with her answer, she told Clear Rain: "I had difficulty in finding An Ching-hsu, but one of his servants says that his master will call on you as soon as he can get away from the girls he is with now."

Honeysuckle laughed: "So we break our rule and receive men from the very beds of other girls! Well, let us hope that it will be worth it. As the son of An Lu-shan, he should be able to arrange our visit to the farm. We shall see."

Clear Rain said: "I hear that this An Ching-hsu is not in the least like his father. That is all to the good, for tall Northerners are apt to be exhausting."

They spent the next hour or so preparing for the visit of An Ching-hsu. Cinnamon was sent to buy wine. No one took any notice of Mother Feng's protests about taking cast-offs from the house next door.

When, finally, An Ching-hsu came, he turned out to be a short, merry man with fat enough to keep out the winter and energy enough to keep warm. He was pleased at the invitation, and asked how the two girls had heard of him.

Honeysuckle said: "It is difficult not to hear of you. Now that the extravagance of the late Emperor and his mistress are no longer discussed at every street corner, we poor women have time to open our ears to other, more important things. Is it true that you knew Yang Kuei-fei?"

An Ching-hsu smiled, and although his smile seemed to be one of pleasure at the question, both girls sensed more behind it. He said: "My father, An Lu-shan, knew her, nearly ten years ago. He hated her cousin, Yang Kuo-chung, but I think he still loved

her. He is sad that his action led to her death."

Clear Rain said: "This is a depressing subject to speak of on a visit. I will pour the wine."

Honeysuckle agreed: "It would be better to forget sorrow in the kindly essence of the earth. Sister, sing us one of your songs when you have served the wine."

Clear Rain filled up the cups. Then she took her lute and sang:

*The golden pheasant and its mate
Are hidden in the miller:
What archer could so hardly hate
The pheasant as to kill it?
The golden pheasant rears its young
Beyond the field of flooded rice:
Why should they fear if nets be flung
Across their rustling paradise?
The golden pheasant flies away
With whirring wings towards the west:
The clay-bound hunter should not stay
To seek the golden pheasant's nest.
The nest is like a dream that is
And is not, is and cannot be,
Woven of hope and fantasies
Like Love, and Love's sincerity.*

An Ching-hsu said: "That is a song of sadness. I thought that you were going to sing a cheerful song."

Honeysuckle sang without music:

*In youth, men drink
Lest they should think,
For thought (they know)
Is passion's foe.
In age, men drink
To see (they think),
A face each remembers
In the fire's embers.*

An Ching-hsu said: "That song is as sad as the other. Why do you both play on the strings of my heart?"

Honeysuckle said to Clear Rain: "It would be wise for you to go and see about that roll of flowered silk. We cannot expect the shopkeeper to save it for us to the detriment of his other customers' interests. You could take Cinnamon with you." When Clear Rain and Cinnamon had gone, Honeysuckle poured out more wine for An Ching-hsu, and shared his cup. The wine (for it was old) soon had the desired effect on him, and Honeysuckle, who knew well that from *sorrow to joy* is a surer key than from *joy to sorrow*, sang him the Ballad of Mu-lan. She knew that this song of a girl who takes her father's place in the army and hides from all the soldiers the fact that pleasure greater than mere camp-fire stories is theirs for the ready taking, excites a man to emulation and unwisdom.

A little later she asked: "And your father was very fond of the Lady Yang? I wonder that he does not go to see how she died. If the stories are true, he would like to know: if they are untrue, he would like to know. The answer is at Ma Wei".

An replied: "He has been thinking of going, but always some official business comes between him and his purpose. You know, I think, how busy he has been persuading the neighbourhood that he brings peace to his subjects?"

Honeysuckle said: "Maybe. But a man who has a question eating at his heart like a rat at a sack of grain is in poor case to convince other people of his one-heartedness. Let him go to Ma Wei and find out. Could you not go with him? We know the daughter of the man on whose estate she stayed: she would tell us more than she would tell to a stranger. Let us all go: we can pretend that it is a holiday in the old days, when all was peace and men thought of other things than killing each other. Now, laugh! For you are nicer when you laugh."

"Little fool!" he answered, not untenderly. "Why do you want to go to Ma Wei? Well, it does not matter why—I will try to get my father to take us all. The change from ruling suspicious people will do his health good. No—come back here. I know as many tricks as you do. Now . . ."

* * *

Clear Rain, driving, shook the horses' reins free and turned to Honeysuckle.

"I have always wanted to drive a carriage with silver rein tips," she said. "It is indeed different from the last time we came in this direction. Do you remember?"

They were crossing the Wei, after having passed the slope of Beautiful Waters.

Honeysuckle said, pointing to the bridge: "The Emperor's troops broke down this bridge when they retreated, although the Emperor had not wanted them to do so lest the people from Chang-an should not be able to escape from the hands of the rebels."

Clear Rain answered: "I know. But it is mended now, so what does it matter?"

Honeysuckle said: "Yes. It does not matter. But the greater comfort in which we travel now is only natural. In Spring the leaves are a pleasant green, as they will be soon, for it is the fifth day of the first moon. In Autumn the leaves are russet. So, if you travel the same road as a fleeing Emperor (although we did not know so at the time) you cannot expect greater comfort than that of hired carrying-chairs, whereas now, in the proximate wake of one who feels himself a new fledged Spring-Emperor, we endure the not very marked discomfort of one of his own carriages, drawn by two excellent Government horses. I have never before been so comfortably near the three flowers branded on the horse's rump, though I remember when I was a child being snatched by my careful nurse from a too close inspection of what might have been those very three flowers."

Clear Rain replied: "Well if you will play the dog's game . . ."

Ahead of them, the two other carriages rolled steadily along the level road, escorts on each side. The nearer of the two held An Ching-hsu's recognisable plumpness: in the further, a tall burly figure, An Lu-shan himself, held the reins gathered in his left hand.

"I want to wave something," Clear Rain said, "but my hands

are too busy." She looked down at Honeysuckle. "Is it not like the days when we were young? Or perhaps you cannot remember that, you who are always planning. I did not mean that."

Honeysuckle said: "And yet my heart is not happy. Everything is happening as we wanted it to happen; we are being taken at no cost to the place to which we wished to go, by the men whom we wished to take us, and yet my heart is not happy. I do not know why this should be."

Clear Rain answered: "You have been eating something, and your stomach does not like the jolting. For me it is easier to be happy, for if you stand up as I am doing, with the wind in your hair and your knees a little bent, your stomach does not feel anything. Besides, I did not eat as much as you did before I started."

Honeysuckle said: "You are quite wrong about the food. No, it is my heart that is sad, and since a heart between two doors is the character for sadness, I can only think that this journey, with its departure from our house and its departure from the finer rules of behaviour, is responsible for my mood. What is there for me to lay at the door of sadness? Money, ease, comfort and pleasant companions—these things should not make me feel as I do feel. Let me drive a little, so that I, too, may feel as if I wanted to wave something other than a funeral cloth."

They exchanged places and Clear Rain went to sleep. Honeysuckle, standing as Clear Rain had stood, saw the road coming towards them, the latent buds awaiting their particular spring, the small, fleecy clouds ahead in the sky, and a single goose flying south. She was remembering that single geese could carry messages of love tied to their legs, and realised that there was no one to whom she would wish to send a message.

Although she bent her knees a little, she felt more unhappy than she wanted to feel.

* * *

At the gates of the estate of Peng Yeh, the escort halted and came together. The three carriages assembled behind the escort. There were the sound of scraping hoofs and the jostling of leather.

An Lu-shan, descending from his carriage, said: "When I am impatient, as now, I am unfilial enough to blame the emotion on my father and my father's father, for I cannot accustom myself to this intolerable Chinese habit of shutting a door first, in order to open it with courtesy. I am not a Chinese and I cannot think wholly like a Chinese."

Honeysuckle was conscious that, for a moment, they were all grouped like motionless actors, awaiting the climax of a tragedy. She cried: "I think I hear men behind the gate, about to open it."

An answered: "I have an almost irresistible desire to break it down. In my country such is the treatment of those who shut doors in my face. And I must learn to do all the things that Chinese do in order to have the door opened—to call, to bribe, to intrigue, to distract the gate-keeper's attention—it is all too indirect for me. You, my son, could probably manage it without effort—I have often noticed how much more you resemble your mother than you resemble me. Some of my other sons, now, show promise of being tall, brusque men, like their father. If it were not . . ."

He broke off, for the gate opened and Peng Yeh came out towards the group. Peng Yeh's face was set and stern, and his empty hands twitched at his sides.

An said: "You see! He hates me."

Peng Yeh asked: "What do you desire?"

An replied: "First, courtesy. That is the cheapest commodity here. Today I come only as a visitor, so we need have no further trouble about titles. My son and these two girls, whom I think you know."

Clear Rain said: "We poured wine for you when we met last."

Peng Yeh took no notice of her.

An Ching-hsu came forward. "Let me try," he suggested. "Sir, we come as *friends from distant quarters*, and regret exceedingly the disruption which, I fear, our visit brings to your household arrangements. Nevertheless, since we wish to enquire of you and your household about facts which you, and not we, are privy to, I beg of you to allow us a short space of talk."

Lu-shan said: "A diplomatist, most unlike a son of mine. And

yet, he succeeds where force would have failed, for if you break into a man's house you do not thereby loosen his tongue. You see, he succeeds."

For Peng Yeh had bowed to An Ching-hsu and began to retire backwards towards his gates. The escort made way for him. The impasse was broken.

* * *

An Lu-shan and his son were seated in the Hall of Audience, drinking tea. The two girls found a serving maid to take them to Winter Cherry's room, and were received with a mixture of formality and affectionate gratitude which was very amusing to Honeysuckle and Clear Rain.

Honeysuckle said: "In her father's house she behaves like a hostess, but I can see that her hair has still not grown again to its proper length."

Clear Rain agreed: "No. But she has put it up, which would seem to make her at any rate partially married."

Winter Cherry replied: "When you have cut your hair off, it is as bad as putting it up. You can never let it down again. But I think it looks better so."

The two visitors looked at each other. Then Honeysuckle said: "Would you consider it pleasant to have a letter from your hair-cutter?"

Winter Cherry cried: "My haircutter? Whom do you mean?"

Clear Rain replied: "When we last met you, you told us a tale of having disguised yourself as a boy. In fact, you looked as if you had tried to do so. But of course . . ."

Honeysuckle said: "The letter is from the honourable Li Po's nephew." She held it out to Winter Cherry. "Here—take it and hide it in your dress. There is someone at the door."

Indeed, Peng Chan-mu appeared in a moment. Honeysuckle and Clear Rain rose to their feet and stood waiting. Winter Cherry fetched a porcelain stool from the side of the room and set it for her brother.

"It is not often," he said as he sat down, "that I find you so well

worth visiting."

The three girls also seated themselves.

"These ladies, whose names are Honeysuckle and Clear Rain," Winter Cherry told him, "aided me on my way home, and I have no way of showing my gratitude."

Peng Chan-mu said: "That is a debt which I could willingly settle for you. In fact, I find their presence here more than a slight compensation for our country loneliness."

Honeysuckle answered: "We are honoured by what your brother says. But no reward is necessary for what we did."

Then there was the sound of other voices in the passage, and soon An Lu-shan and his son appeared.

Peng Chan-mu cried: "It is not right that you should come to my sister's room. I am her brother, but you . . ."

Lu-shan put out a hand and took Peng Chan-mu by the shoulder. With no apparent effort he thrust the young man aside, out of the door, saying as he did so: "You seem to forget that I now occupy the Dragon Throne, and for me there is no right and wrong. What I will, is." He closed the door and turned to the others. "Is this the girl who calls herself Winter Cherry?"

Winter Cherry replied, rising: "That is my name."

Lu-shan continued: "I desire to hear from your lips, since seemingly you know more than does your father, all the events which occurred between the arrival of the late Emperor's party and their departure, so far as it concerns the late Lady Yang Kuei-fei." Then, since they had all bowed at the Emperor's name, he shouted: "Enough of this foolery. I am now the Emperor. It is to me that you should bow, not to the name and memory of one who threw the Empire away and will soon be taken by my own men. Go, all of you. I will talk with this girl alone."

When the others had left them, Winter Cherry said: "I am sure that my father has told you all that you could wish to know."

Lu-shan answered: "No, since he does not know it. Come, there is nothing to be afraid of. Forget for a little while who I am: tell me in your own words the story of what happened here. Now, I know that the Lady Yang came earlier, with some boy or

other, and that when the late Emperor arrived he called for her. Go on from there."

Winter Cherry asked: "But why should I tell you? She is dead, and what she did before she died does not matter to you. Besides . . ."

He broke in: "Tell me what happened; do not ask me why I desire to know. Girl, I have means to make people talk. You would not have thus refused to tell the late Emperor. Now that I am Emperor, you must tell me. I am being very patient. Or, if you need a reason—for women are unreasonable enough to want that—let it suffice that I knew her when I first came to Court. She was kind to me. Is that a reason enough for you?"

She replied, fearing him: "I must take it as a reason. But I do not know how she came to hang herself."

He cried: "She hanged herself? But they told me she was taken out and ridden down by the soldiers! What is this nonsense?"

Winter Cherry told him: "They had intended to do so, and I, who did not know of her hanging, dressed myself in her clothes and went out towards the soldiers, so that they would kill me and let her live. But Han Im went to her room and found her dead. So he cut her down and took her out to where I was, and I do not remember more, until I found myself on Han Im's saddle on the way back here."

"It is easy to see what Han Im did," Lu-shan said, moodily. "And why he did it. But there are two questions which you have not answered."

She replied: "I do not know the answers."

Lu-shan said: "Since I have not yet asked the questions, how can that be? Listen—first, why did she hang herself? Second, why did you try to take her place?"

She said: "I do not know the answer to your first question, and to the second I can only say that the Emperor loved her, and I desired to serve the Emperor."

"Show me where she died," he commanded.

When they had gone to this other room, she told him: "She died here, Han Im said. There is the top part of the bowstring, still

on the rafter. He thought that, unless he left it, the Emperor would not believe that she had hanged herself. Han Im said that she must have died at once—that her neck was broken. Now, may I go, please?"

Before they came out of the room Lu-shan rolled the porcelain stool from the corner, climbed upon it and untied the remainder of the bowstring. He coiled it up and put it in an inner pocket of his clothing.

Winter Cherry said: "She stood upon that stool to hang herself."

Lu-shan rolled the stool back in the corner, and they went together out into the courtyard.

"Where is she buried?" he asked.

"It was not possible to bury her," Winter Cherry replied.

From the courtyard where they stood they could hear shouting which seemed to be coming from the little garden by the summerhouse. Clear Rain ran towards them.

"Stop them! They are killing each other!" she cried.

When he reached the garden Lu-shan saw Honeysuckle standing in the summerhouse with An Ching-hsu near her, sword in his hand. There was blood upon the blade of the sword, and below him, half in the water of the stream, Peng Chan-mu lay in an untidy heap. The slow water of the stream was not now colourless over its white pebbles.

Lu-shan said: "I called you a diplomatist, and yet it would seem that you can behave like any Chinese. Can you not yet take your women without making a mess?"

Winter Cherry had come up beside him. She gasped when she saw her brother's body, and at once realised all the possibilities.

"You must go at once," she said. "If you do not, my father will want to fight with you, which would be foolish, and my grandfather, seeing now no second generation to tend the tombs—I do not know what he would do. Go quickly, before they come and find out. I have nothing more to tell you, so there is no reason for your staying and making further trouble and sorrow for all of us."

An Lu-shan said: "Clean your sword and put it up. Then come with me. You have no more wisdom than your mother had. It is not thus that one may rule a country of philosophers. Quickly! And you, too," he added to Winter Cherry.

She dared not try to make him change his mind. All three went through the courtyard to the doorway. Clear Rain was nowhere to be seen. Lu-shan put Winter Cherry in his own carriage. An Ching-hsu followed in the second.

"Leave the other," Lu-shan ordered, and they moved off.

* * *

Father Peng turned his face to the wall. "I do not wish to see any of my family," he said. "Although I have a son, that son has no son, and my father's tomb and his father's tomb must go untended on the hill side when my son is dead, and the hares and wild foxes will walk over our tombs and the weather will slowly cross out the names upon those tombs, and the wind and the worms will conspire together so that by and by there will be nothing of those tombs but a smooth place, and the heels of men will raise dust upon them."

Peng Yeh said: "But . . ."

Father Peng cried in a loud voice: "Leave me!"

Outside the Lady of the Tapestry said: "He cannot be left like that. Old men die so easily when their hearts seem broken, that I fear to leave him as he says. But if we go in again he will be angry as well as heartbroken, and anger is as bad for an old man's life as is sorrow. Alas!

*Whose is the graveyard?
Ghosts crowd within it,
Wise with the unwise,
Death's King their master—
Man's doom halts not.*

Alas, I do not know what to do."

Honeysuckle said: "You will forgive me for having overheard what you have just said. But, if it is a question of funeral songs,

the one which you have just quoted is chanted only at the graves of common men. *The Dew on the Garlic Leaf*. . ."

Peng Yeh turned sharply on his heel and left them.

The Lady of the Tapestry cried: "Alas, my son is dead and my husband does not know what to do. I know that his honourable father will certainly die from sorrow if he is left thus with his face to the wall. Aiya!"

Clear Rain, who had come up, said softly: "Let Honeysuckle go in to him. He is old and therefore courteous, and will feel compelled to talk with her. It may be that he will hate her, but if he talks he will not die. Prepare a bowl of hot broth and send it in by your youngest daughter. He will not blame her for disobeying his orders. The old are always absurdly tolerant of the young."

Honeysuckle looked at the Lady of the Tapestry and the Lady of the Tapestry nodded assent. Honeysuckle went in through the dark door into the darker room.

"I am not of your family," Honeysuckle said, "and therefore I am bold to enter. Further, the trouble was of my making, though not my intentional making, and though your son's son has *ridden on the Dragon*, there is that in my hostess' face and in her bearing which seems to me to say that the period which seems to have been set at the end of today's sentence may after all turn out to be a comma."

For a while the old man did not speak. The sound of his breathing was clear and yet rusty in the stillness of the undecorated room. While she waited, Honeysuckle looked round her and saw the low table, the scroll in fine calligraphy, and the spartan bed at the end of the room. She saw also the nail upon which nothing hung, and the curved patch of lighter wall just below it.

"Discourtesy is foreign to me," Father Peng murmured, "but may I be permitted to ask why you are here?"

Honeysuckle replied: "You had a sword once—a sword which is now no longer hanging on your wall. You could not have put it to any purpose save to serve the Emperor. So with yourself. When he returns, the Emperor will not wish to find everywhere more sorrow than has been directly occasioned by his sad going."

Father Peng asked: "Who are you, girl, that talk in the old accents of the old tongue to which my ears are tuned? All round me, lately, it has seemed that speech was short and courtesy discounted; courtiers seem no longer courteous, the gemmed words of our ancestors seem now but settings from which the pearls have fallen, and language, that medium for the highest thoughts of man, serves but to count bushels of grain or number the plum stones on an empty dish. Who are you?"

Honeysuckle quoted: "When Lao-Tsu died, his disciple Chin Shih, come to mourn, yelled thrice and went away. He said, in more words than I have, that birth and death are natural things, not to be mourned with white clothes and instruments. He said that though the wood is burned, yet the fire is passed on; we know not that it has an ending."

Father Peng demanded: "Where did you learn this thing?"

She answered: "Life is a school where wisdom may be learned, and never, until the coffin is last shut, does learning end. I have given you cause for hope, if you have heard rightly what I have said, and yet I find you gazing with closed eyes at nothing. I have traded on your courtesy in listening to me, and I have no right to say more. Your youngest granddaughter is hovering outside the door with a bowl of broth. Have I your permission to tell her to come in and tender it to you?"

The old man said: "Tell her to come in."

As Mooi-tsai crossed the floor with the broth, Honeysuckle said: "I will leave you now. Walk as well as may be. Do not give Chin Shih cause for further unseemly commotion, I pray of you."

As she went out she could hear Mooi-tsai saying: "Here, grandfather."

* * *

"I am cruel," An Lu-shan said, as the hoofs of the horses set small trails of dust wheeling to the sides of the road. "I am cruel. It gives me pleasure to be cruel. The duties and necessities which make me have to seem otherwise, the politenesses expected of a provincial governor—the need for these has now passed. My son and my

officials may negotiate and persuade, but I do not now have to screen my nature behind these fragilities."

Winter Cherry sat on the floor of the carriage, making no reply to this. She did not say anything of the hundred things in her heart, not only because she knew that to speak of them would be to precipitate further calamity, but also because the blows which the Gods had seen fit to award left her mind in so much of a turmoil that even the ability of speech seemed to call for an effort beyond her powers. She was not even conscious that she had not eaten since early morning. The only emotion which dimly penetrated her consciousness was one of smouldering hate—the hate which she felt for these tough unfeeling Northerners, who made pride at their lack of feeling the only outer sign of anything at all within.

Lu-shan seemed to understand.

He said: "You are hungry, and I am hungry. That is good. Your nature is revolted and you therefore hate me. That is also good. Your nostrils are full of the smell of blood. Your mind is dimly conspiring with your muscles to seize the knife from my belt and thrust it into my side, turning the blade about with the noisy grating of revenge. But you will not do this. You will be a true Chinese, doing nothing at all. Look! As we round this hill, you see Chang-an, my city of Chang-an, before you. We have come an unnecessary distance round to the southern outskirts, so that we may enter by the gate that leads into the Street of Heaven with three roads on our left and five on our right, through Red Bird Gate and the Imperial City to the Palace. And you know what awaits you within the Palace."

Looking sideways, she could see his profile against the eastern sky. In front of her, as he had said, she saw the full stretch of the city, as she had seen it once before when she first came to enter the women's apartments in the Pepper Rooms. The mingled dread and pleasure which her heart had then known seemed small indeed beside this emotion which her dulled heart could not even analyse or name. In Chang-an streets, the brown, long streets which now they faced, people lived, people lived and loved and were ordinary. Her thoughts, like a diffident mouse behind grain sacks, roused to

ask her why she should thus be poised in publicity, why it was not for her to live the usual life of the people of a hundred surnames, why the sloping roofs of those long, brown streets could not shelter her from the heat and dust, from the rain and biting wind, in a glow of that conventional living which seemed to her now, above everything else, desirable. *The good man*, she remembered, *does not think of himself*. But here she was thinking of nothing else.

Lu-shan said: "My son, Ching-hsu, would kill me as readily as he killed your brother, if he could. He hates me, as you hate me, because I represent something that he cannot understand. He fears me, as you fear me, because I represent something whose actions he cannot predict. He loves me, as you love me, because I represent something that is not in him nor in you, something primitive and great. And now I have lacked dignity enough to step down from my Northern Throne and become like you a Chinese speaking with three neatly balanced platitudes. You are an insidious race, with no clear edges to your shadows. Look at the ruled lines of those shadows where the low sun cuts between the houses. Then look, in your mind's eye, at the soft outlines of twice seventy-eight fans in the Hall at the summer festival. The first is myself. The second is you. And, though the feet of these horses now clatter proudly on the roads of my Capital city, there is within me the feeling that the fans may overcome the shadows. It is uncertainty, but it is better that it should be uncertainty."

They swept under Red Bird Gate, through the Imperial City, and drew up beside the Palace buildings.

Beyond lay the darkening Park.

* * *

At Sui-yang, Ah Lai was writing a letter, taking a particular joy in the calligraphy.

*Behind me the setting sun is red, red.
There are no cicadas in winter.
The watchman beats his cracked gong;
The distant sentries speak in frosty tones.
Behind me the setting sun is red, red.*

*There, beyond that sun, the Emperor mourns;
 Before me the tips of the hills redden.
 I do not look toward the departing sun;
 My thoughts are not with the Son of Heaven.
 Chang-an lies beyond the reddened peaks;
 You lie forever beyond my reach.
 Behind me the setting sun is red, red.
 A soldier comes to ask about provisions;
 A bird flies past me into the sunset.
 The breasts of the hills are brown now;
 Only the hill-tips glow like a memory.
 My brush on the paper moves slowly;
 The yamen water-clock seems to hesitate.
 Half the sunlight has gone.
 All the hill breasts are shadowed.
 Night creeps between us;
 The day has yet to come.
 Behind me the setting sun is blood, blood.
 But the miles do not alter in the darkness.
 One day I shall return.
 Only the sky is red behind me.*

* * *

Sitting at a table in a room which she had never seen, Winter Cherry watched Lu-shan and his son eating. Silent servants brought dishes of food from the taster at the door and set them on the table. Winter Cherry felt herself wondering whether a sorrow could be so deep, a fear so pressing, a revulsion so powerful that the effects of these cancelled each other out and the body went on living, eating, moving and giving speech as if there were no sorrow, no fear and no revulsion.

Lu-shan was saying: "You did not behave today, my son, as your past conduct has led me to expect. Always you were the careful, thoughtful person, swift to avoid swiftness, ready for the local compromise. And then, because you see some little drab whose eyes are not on you, you forget yourself and, whipping out your

uncharacteristic sword, do to the drab's companion what I now do to this very pleasant pear. I am disappointed in you."

Ching-hsu replied: "One cannot always be icy. And, indeed, I think that you, who used to be an impulsive example to your family, expect too much of me. After all, he had seized a common hoe and pretended to be threatening me with it. The girl watched with wide eyes, and I felt that my reputation was in question. How could I do else?"

Winter Cherry said: "He was my brother."

Ching-hsu replied, laughing: "That could be remedied, had your father the making of a man."

Lu-shan observed: "To implant in this girl the precisely exact degree of suitable emotions is my affair, not yours. That she will run through the gamut of these emotions is as probable as I can manage to make it. Yet I would not owe anything of their inception to you, lest you should claim for your own mind a vicarious pleasure in my pleasure, an unearned surfeit of my surfeit. In short, our meal is over, and you have your own apartments. These are mine. Come girl."

The next room, and the next she had not seen. She did not see them now, if seeing meant more than mere appreciation of change. She was numbed, regarding the fingers of her left hand as though with surprise. She was cold, too, cold as the back of his sword blade that slid easily between silks and skin. Her voice, also, did not seem to be her own now and the great gong that boomed forever was her heart. Straw figures at the sacrifice have jointed limbs, and these limbs move as though they were men's limbs. But the jointed, straw figures do not live. They are, indeed, offered as simple sacrifices to Gods who were once thought to demand real sacrifices.

His broad bladed sword lay now on the low table near the door. It could be a short leap. But his grip was round her wrist and she could not leap. His back was towards the door, and her wide eyes opened no wider when she saw Lu Ching-hsu enter on soft feet and softly take the naked sword. Whether she fainted then or not, she was not sure, but ever after, in bad dreams, the

broad blade of a sword would move across her imagination and swiftly, as the dream broke, a red screen would spread between her and the light, a red screen across which the slanting sword moved slantingly and rose and slanted and moved and coloured and dripped and was thrown into a corner with a clang which was the breaking of the dream.

* * *

"I have not enjoyed this day," Clear Rain said to Honeysuckle. "Going was all right, and it was amusing until the unfortunate Peng Chan-mu lost his temper. Afterwards . . ."

Honeysuckle replied: "It is indeed exactly as you say. And now, having brought these excellent and decorative government horses back to the Capital, they refuse to go farther. It is as if they knew perfectly well that it would be improper for us to take them to the Palace, and yet, however firmly we urge them, they stand and look as stupid as any ordinary horse that has not had the three flowers branded on his rump. We cannot just leave them here while we walk home."

Clear Rain said: "I wonder if it hurts very much to have three flowers branded on you."

Honeysuckle smiled. "They might move then," she said.

Then each girl, moved by the same impulse, took a pointed hairpin and stood just clear of the wheel.

"Do not let the wheel pass over your foot," Clear Rain said. "Now!"

When they felt the pin-pricks, the horses started off rapidly with the empty carriage, presumably in the direction of their palace stables.

Honeysuckle observed: "We are told of the Master that *he did not ask after the horses*. I do not think that we need ask about the horses either."

They did not have to walk far, but when they reached the door of Mother Feng's house a great crowd had already collected. Mother Feng stood truculently at her doorway, arguing with servants wearing the livery of some great family. The two girls

edged their way in until they could hear what was being said.

Mother Feng cried: "You may be servants of any family you wish, however exalted, but mine is a respectable house and the only sort of gifts which I am accustomed to see pass over my threshold are much more valuable than this roll of matting. Probably your master has some sort of practical joke in mind, and if I allowed you to bring the bundle in, he would make trouble with the authorities and accuse me of having stolen it."

Honeysuckle said to the cleanest of the servants: "Tell me."

The man said: "We have enough trouble in the world from the orders of our mistress, the honourable wife of the exalted An Ching-hsu, without listening to the quite unmerited rudeness of that old woman yonder. I think it would be better to tip the bundle in the road and go away."

"But why did she send it?" Honeysuckle asked, moving out of the hearing of Mother Feng.

The servant replied: "My master's father has been killed, and nobody is supposed to know who did the killing. My mistress found this body, unclothed, in the room with her dead father-in-law, and (not wishing to complicate affairs) she thought it best to send the body to the address written on a letter in a pocket of the clothes which had, seemingly, once belonged to this body." He held out for her to see Ah Lai's poem and his letter to Honeysuckle. "Do not tell me, after all the trouble that we have had, that this is not the house named in the letter!"

Honeysuckle ordered: "Take it inside to our room."

Mother Feng would have interfered, but Honeysuckle stamped gently on both her feet and the bundle was carried in. The servants returned gladly, chattering amongst themselves, and Clear Rain loosed the bundle.

"I was afraid she was dead," Honeysuckle said, "but it seems that to invest in a doctor might not certainly be a clear loss. You go, Clear Rain, for a doctor will probably come more quickly for you than for that stupid girl Cinnamon, and there is no one else to send."

Mother Feng, who had come into the room with them, was

sent for clean, hot water and Honeysuckle, disentangling Winter Cherry from the blood-soaked clothes in which she had been loosely wrapped, laid her upon the bed and began the more immediate and necessary cleansing.

When Clear Rain arrived with the doctor the visible parts of Winter Cherry were clean, pale and apparently lifeless. They brought the doctor a stool and he sat down by the bed.

Honeysuckle told him: "I do not know what has happened to her. She does not seem to have suffered any outside harm."

"Her breath is feeble," the doctor said, "and her pulse is like the wing of a butterfly in winter, when it has come out of a warm corner. She is very cold. If you can get her to drink a little hot broth, there may be a chance. Of course, although it is not my business to ask, my eyes could not fail to notice the bloodstained garments upon the floor." He hesitated, and then said again: "It is not any of my business."

Honeysuckle took some silver from a box and paid the doctor.

"You are quite right in what you have just said," she replied, and the doctor went away looking very puzzled.

Then Honeysuckle and Clear Rain started to warm Winter Cherry and by-and-by the girl opened her lips far enough for a few drops of soup to enter.

Clear Rain observed: "It is quite an unusual experience to have three people in the same bed under such a pile of clothing that we, at least, are sweating as if we had run to the Palace ourselves instead of sending the horses. But it was a pity that we went to Ma Wei. Let this be a lesson to you, sister, not to carry the virtue of thrift too far, but next time to hire a proper messenger."

"She is not so unpleasantly like a fish now," Honeysuckle said.

* * *

The girl, Winter Cherry, was well enough in body to be taken home to the estate of her father towards the end of the second moon, and, two days after the festival of Clear Brightness which is the first day of the third moon, Honeysuckle and Clear Rain hired two carrying chairs with old and respectable men to carry them, setting out on

the road to Ma Wei when the sun had only shown a quarter of his width above the horizon. When the Lady of the Tapestry had greeted them, she sent for her husband, excusing this unconventional behaviour with a quiet smile.

"After all," she said, "not your doings nor my daughter's seem to have been much ruled by convention."

The two girls politely agreed with her, sitting on the edges of their stools and looking towards the door.

When Peng Yeh entered he, too, greeted them in a manner which they had not expected.

"I owe to you two girls the body of my daughter," he said, "and therefore if in my speech to you I seem to speak as one who sees before him members of his own family, you will pardon what might seem to be discourtesy."

Honeysuckle asked: "How is she?"

The Lady of the Tapestry replied: "She eats and sleeps and does all the other things which one would expect of a child. She came with us all on the feast two days ago to visit our family tombs and did there all the ceremonial performance which is necessary. My husband's father was very much impressed by her behaviour. But with all this, she has only spoken once, and I did not hear her. It was the youngest, Mooi-tsai, who was near the summerhouse when she heard it. Shall I send for the child?"

But, as she spoke, the door darkened and Father Peng came in, followed by his two granddaughters, Mei and Mooi-tsai. Honeysuckle and Clear Rain rose to their feet with the rest and made low bows. Father Peng returned the bows, sat down on the stool which Mooi-tsai brought for him, and bade them all be seated.

"I am indeed glad," Father Peng said, "that you two ladies have come, giving us the rare opportunity of hearing through not too many successive mouths what may be happening outside our rustic world. Here, everything is regulated by the seasons, and there lacks here that due information of unexpected activities which serve as sauce to our lives."

Honeysuckle replied: "We are indeed grateful, sir, for the opportunity of seeing for ourselves that you are in the best of health. As

for news, the capital is full of it, but whether it be reliable news or news which, as you yourself said, has passed through too many mouths to be readily believed, is a matter which a querulous person might dispute. You have probably heard much, but so far as certain facts are concerned one can only say that the Heir Apparent allowed himself to be proclaimed Emperor and that later, some time after the Bright Emperor had reached his present, remote palace in Cheng-tu, he, too, was graciously pleased to proclaim the same thing. There are, of course, further tales of the generals and armies of both sides, who pursue and are pursued probably nearly as much as public credulity would credit. But nothing is decisive. I should have said that nothing was decisive until, in the first moon of this year, the rebel An Lu-shan was slain by his rebel son. Nevertheless, it makes but little difference to us girls which rebel may sit temporarily upon the Dragon Throne."

Clear Rain said: "An Lu-shan burnt the ancestral temple and the tablets of the Emperor."

The old man seemed to be digesting this news, and Peng Yeh said: "It will solve itself in time. Here, as my father has said, we have little news with which to regale you."

Father Peng asked: "Of what were you speaking before I came in?"

The Lady of the Tapestry replied: "Our visitors were very kindly enquiring after the health of our eldest daughter, and I was about to send for the little Mooi-tsai here, in order to discover what were the only words which our eldest daughter spoke on the occasion when the child overheard her in the summerhouse."

Father Peng said: "Tell us, child."

Mooi-tsai answered: "She said: 'We must be going now.' That is all I heard."

Clear Rain, having observed that no one else was going to speak immediately, observed: "There is clearly hope for her mind. She must have received a shock and a sorrow such as we have not been able to discover."

Mei asked: "Is it permitted that I should speak?" Then, seeing this permission in their faces, she went on: "My sister has a folded

piece of paper which she will allow no one to take away from her, a piece of paper which she unfolds and seems to read, but which she folds up and puts back into her inner pocket if she thinks that anyone is watching her."

Then Winter Cherry herself came in, looked round the room without change of face, and went out. They saw her pass across the courtyard towards the garden.

The Lady of the Tapestry said: "You must stay with us for the night. We owe you much. Mooi-tsai, see that the servants give food to the bearers and arrange for their bedding."

* * *

"So you hold your court at sunrise," Honeysuckle said, as she came towards Father Peng. "You will forgive me if I seem to forget myself so far as to speak first, but girls such as I are always ready to speak, to chatter in fact, perhaps in order to keep their minds off other matters."

Father Peng glanced at the sun in the East, then at the long shadow of the summerhouse across the garden. His hands were inside the sleeves of his padded coat.

"From a creditor one does not look for apologies," he returned. "No—you two girls have strayed far from your accustomed path in order to do a kindness to me and my family, and I feel that you have the right to speak first at a Court which, if I were a younger man, would take on an appearance difficult to explain in terms of the customary morning obeisance. Indeed, I begin to realise how much I have lost lately by my irrational retirement into seclusion: I see how foolish it is to assume that a dulling of the body's fires should be followed by a flagging of mental flexibility. In fact, I have already derived much pleasure from the conversation which you two have provided. Also, we are grateful to you, as I have said."

Honeysuckle, too, put her hands into her padded sleeves.

"There is a new sun-birth each day," she said. "I am always glad to exchange my more usual activities for a turn as midwife."

Father Peng took her up. "Arising from that," he said, "I remember, too, when your presence brought me back from the grey

depression which followed on my grandson's death, by holding out a tenuous hope of his replacement."

She replied: "It is difficult to speak on that. You will understand that I am more accustomed to say of a girl that she is not going to have a child than to estimate the probability that she will. And with already married women it is still more difficult. There are signs . . . One can but wait in patience."

Thus she concealed, as far as might be, her near-certainty that the Lady of the Tapestry was not, at the immediate future, likely to make Father Peng again the possessor of a grandson.

Father Peng was saying: "I should take it as a courtesy if you could so far postpone your business in the Capital as to spare us another day of your company. I shall claim the right to deal with the claims of your bearers. But it has occurred to me that the greater, unknown shock which my eldest granddaughter has seemingly suffered might yield to the lesser, known sorrow which she experienced on the day of the death of the Lady Yang. I thought that perhaps, if you or your friend took the girl out yonder on to the slope where she was saved from a horrible death by the eunuch Han Im, something of what she felt there might flow back into her empty mind and start a return to herself."

Honeysuckle answered: "I will get Clear Rain to go with her. Clear Rain is the possessor of a soothing, receptive personality. I, myself, am a little too sharp at the corners, too much like . . ."

Father Peng replied: "Like unresponsive jade? No; you could not be said to resemble unresponsive jade. But if you think that the girl Clear Rain would serve our purpose the better, it shall be so. They ought to have a bowl of soup, at least, ready by now."

Honeysuckle promptly praised the evening meal of the night before, saying that its efficiency as a satisfier of appetites left her unable to take any complimentary interest in food so soon.

"The frogs' legs and bean-sprouts were remarkable enough in themselves," she said, "but the sauce which was served with them, seemingly containing ginger and honey, made one forget the frogs in the excitement of the ginger, made one disregard the bean-sprouts in the surprise of the honey."

Yet, when the soup was served in the Great Hall, she did not leave any at the bottom of her bowl.

* * *

Clear Rain said to the groom: "I think she wants to ride. You would be wise to put a saddle on the horse."

The groom replied: "I will do so. You will want a horse as well? It is fortunate that in the neighbourhood of Chang-an we are famous throughout the Eight Directions for the breeding of horses; otherwise the officers who came from the Capital to requisition mounts would not have left us these two." He busied himself with a girth.

Clear Rain had always wanted to ride a horse. She remembered that the Lady Kuo Kuo, the sister of the Lady Yang, had been famous for her horsemanship, and that it was owing to this skill that she and the wife of her unfortunate brother, Yang Kuo, had been killed by the soldiers at another place. But, despite this unhappy idea, she still wanted to ride, and the others, coming out of the Great Hall, were astonished to see the two girls riding out through the side doors, Winter Cherry leading and Clear Rain clinging to her own saddle-bow with mock desperation.

"If only I could grip the beast properly with my knees!" she cried as she went by.

Honeysuckle forbore to make a suitable reply, and they all watched the two move slowly up the slope away from them.

Clear Rain did not speak as they rode, for she was fully occupied. She had never dreamed that a seat could be so precarious that it demanded all her attention, and began to feel admiration for those horsemen whom one saw daily in Chang-an reining in their steeds to a pivoting stand or moving with them as if man and horse were part of the same animal.

Winter Cherry led on, walking her horse gently up the slope. Near the top, she reined in. Clear Rain came up beside her.

"It was here," Winter Cherry said. Then she shook the reins and moved off back to the farm.

Later, rubbing herself carefully, Clear Rain told Honeysuckle

what Winter Cherry had said.

Honeysuckle replied: "She is remembering. What she needs now to cure her is the presence of that boy Ah Lai, who is now far away on the Emperor's business. And how did you like riding? As you went by on your way out I nearly called after you to keep your knees together."

"But on a horse one cannot keep the knees together, whichever way one sits," Clear Rain replied.

Honeysuckle answered: "I know. But I thought possibly our hosts might misunderstand me, and I did not want that. Here—let me rub some oil in. Then I must go and discuss poetry with the old man. All men are really the same, I have found out, for they all have something to show you, something to discuss with you, and something to ask your advice about. With the old man, it is poetry."

"A finger's breadth more towards the middle," Clear Rain answered.

* * *

Old Father Peng wrote with fine calligraphy:

It is the last day of the third moon. Midnight.

Rain pours down upon the growing grain.

The Bright Emperor is still absent from his palace.

The streets of Chang-an ring with the horse-hoofs of the rebels.

The stronghold of Sui-yang has been broken.

Its commander, while he lived, had gnashed his teeth to stumps

So that only four remained to eat horse-meat with.

An Ching-hsu commands his countless Northerners:

Shih Ssu-ning still fights like a tiger.

All horses have been taken for one side or the other.

But today we have had two good pieces of news,

For Lofly Barrier Pass has come to our hands again,

And this morning, blushing, my son's wife told me of her good fortune.

*It seems that I shall not want a grandson to worship at my
tomb.*

*And yet I must not, like Pu Lo, suffer from over-confidence:
The child may yet prove to be a girl.*

* * *

PART FOUR

In the ninth moon, during the period of Cold Dew, the farm stood silent, secret and remote under a slanting sun. The grain had been garnered: the autumn work was done. The farm gates stood bolted and barred, and from a single, high window Father Peng looked out to the north-west.

All day long the battle had been joined there, over the ridges. All the morning long Father Peng had watched men move past the farm towards the fight, too hasty to bend even a glance in the direction of the shut gates. All the afternoon he had seen men stream back towards the Capital, men broken and downcast, archers with their bows loose, horses with sweat dried white on their coats. And all day had come nearer the sound of drums beating the advance, gongs sounding the retreat.

Still Father Peng watched, hastily gulping soup which they brought him, then setting it down and turning back to the high window.

The last few came.

When they, too, had passed towards the Capital, a figure on a horse appeared on the crest and halted there. A second man appeared beside the rider and it seemed from his fuller garments that he could be a priest. He was on foot. Then the two moved slowly down towards the farm and, after they had passed out of range of Father Peng's window, he could hear the sound of knocking at the outer gate.

When Father Peng reached the gate, Peng Yeh and the servants had reached there first.

"Do not open the gates," Peng Yeh was saying to the servants, "for these men who knock should be stragglers from the battle, and to let in one side is an invitation to the other to follow."

Father Peng went towards the bolted doors. "Let me go out and

see who they are," he said, "for I am an old man and they will do no harm to me. Besides, you can bolt the door again after me and only open it when I tell you to."

When the sound of the bolt behind him had ceased, Father Peng looked at the two men. He could see now that his first guess had been right, for the man on foot was undoubtedly a priest. The other, he saw, was quite young, and there seemed about his face something familiar. Nevertheless, Father Peng could not call to mind the name that ran with that face.

Bowing, Father Peng said: "If indeed, you come bent on peace, what proof have I of that? This is the house of Peng. What is your business?"

The young man replied: "My name is Kuen Ah Lai, and I certainly come with peaceful intentions. That you should not recognise me at once I put down to your honourable years, but I would recall to you a certain poem of which you wrote three lines and I the fourth."

He recited:

*My son has set apart a room for my use:
My son's wife brings me broth in a steaming bowl.
Alas, this kindness has made me homesick
For a house of rough planking—six feet by two.*

Father Peng cried: "Open the gates!" Then he turned again to Ah Lai, saying: "You are both very welcome."

Inside the gate Father Peng did not invite Peng Yeh to meet his guests, but led them, bowing, towards his own room. To Mooi-tsai, who had not held herself at such a distance as courtesy dictated, he said: "Child! Tell one of the servants to bring some clear wine and then go to your mother and ask her to instruct you on the correct behaviour of the younger female members of a family when their senior greets a guest."

When the old man had seen Ah Lai seated to his own satisfaction, and the priest had taken up his position sitting on the floor, enough time had passed for the servant to bring the wine.

Father Peng began: "I sent for wine rather than for tea first

because I have the privilege of knowing you and second because I am sure that you have a story to tell, since you came from the direction of the fighting."

Ah Lai replied: "I am much honoured. This priest is a friend of mine—so much of a friend that I have not asked his name. His title is The Guardian of the Hidden Spring. After all, his profession is more informative than his name, and in the absence of more priests than one there is likely to be no confusion." He went on to the priest: "This is the honourable Peng Lao, the father of the house."

Father Peng demanded eagerly: "What is the progress of the fight?"

Ah Lai replied: "We have taken no part in it ourselves, as you may see, but it is sufficiently true to say that the rebels are everywhere beaten and that the loyal soldiers of the Bright Emperor and of his son have triumphed. Our forces are now pursuing the enemy towards the city, and it is not expected that An Ching-hsu and his associates will try to hold it."

Father Peng rose to his feet and, turning towards the north, made a profound obeisance. Then he said: "One must achieve the right direction, though the Emperor in Cheng-tu is to my left and his palace throne to my south-east. However, the formalities are complied with." He filled Ah Lai's cup with wine and then hesitated as he turned towards the priest.

The priest said: "It may seem unorthodox to you, but I have always believed that one may seek The Way of Tao as well through a cup of wine as through any other way." He rose to his feet and held out the cup for Father Peng to fill.

When they had all seated themselves again and Father Peng had given the signal to drink, the priest observed: "Had I known what sort of wine this is, I should have been even more definite in my approval of it."

Ah Lai said: "The business on which I have come is twin. One half of it, however, immediately concerns you, sir, and that is the intention of the Bright Emperor, who justly foresaw that Heaven could not deny him this victory and his return, to pass through this place when that return has been arranged, and to remain here long enough to relive and enquire into the events of the last fateful day

when he was here, when danger and duty alike conspired to make him hasten along the forbidding trail which leads through the Western Mountains to his present temporary palace. He wishes this for a reason which will readily occur to you."

The priest put in: "Steps may be retraced, but moments never."

"That sort of sentence," Ah Lai told Father Peng, "is the sort of sentence to which I have become increasingly accustomed since my meeting with this priest. It is just as well that this should be so, for otherwise the rigours of the life which I have lately been leading, a life of short phrases and shorter orders would have rendered me totally unfit for the company of people as cultured as yourself, sir."

The priest quoted: "*If language is lucid, that is enough.*"

"But," Father Peng replied, "the first thing is to get the words right."

"I see that I need not teach you," the priest said.

Father Peng replied: "*It is pleasant to persevere in learning.*"

"*Give up learning and you will be spared much trouble,*" the priest said.

Ah Lai contributed: "*Every building starts from the ground,* and I am still young."

Then they all laughed.

"Drink up, fill up, and then get up and come with me to see the rest of my family," Father Peng said. "It will be good for them all. You, sir, have already done so."

Ah Lai replied: "I have had that honour. But it is an honour that can readily bear repetition."

"I must warn you," Father Peng said, "that my eldest granddaughter has suffered the sad affliction of silence since the abominable rebel An Lu-shan seized her and took her to the Capital. Since she was brought back later by a pair of very pleasant girls called Honeysuckle and Clear Rain, who seemed from their conversation to have heard of you, my granddaughter has spoken precisely two sentences. We do not know if she will recover."

The priest said: "That is my province. Let me see her." By saying this he drew Father Peng's attention away from the undoubted surprise and other, deeper emotions which Ah Lai's face did not suc-

ceed in concealing. The old man, however, insisted on their seeing Peng Yeh first.

"My wife," Peng Yeh said, "is unfortunately occupied at the moment. Later, perhaps . . ."

The priest said: "Show me an empty room and send me your eldest daughter." He signed to Ah Lai to follow him into the room which Father Peng indicated.

"But this is the room where the woman hanged herself!" Peng Yeh cried.

The priest replied: "So much the better."

* * *

The priest had seated himself with his back to the wall opposite the door which opened in the middle of the opposite wall. Winter Cherry and Ah Lai each faced one of the remaining walls, sitting on mats on the floor. The priest saw that the light through the paper window was failing. He took from inside his robe a small pellet of incense which he placed upon a stone upon the floor in front of him. Then he took out flint and steel, coaxed a tinder spark to flame and kindled the corner of the pellet, which he then put back upon its stone. He put away the flint and steel and sat without sound, without moving.

Ah Lai, as a good Confucian, felt that he should have protested at the use of supposedly magical devices so far out of their proper place, but waited, wondering what the priest's next move might be.

Then the priest said: "The Way of Tao is not possible to understand. But by not understanding it we can understand what it is. Life goes on in pairs—consciousness and no-consciousness, light and no-light, being and not-being. The essence of Tao which we cannot understand escapes us because of its very simplicity: He who follows Tao loses it because he follows it; he who does not seek it finds it because he does not seek it."

In the still light the smoke from the incense rose like a ruler to break above their heads. There was no movement and the priest was silent long enough for Ah Lai to notice that since his last words the light had grown less. Then the priest went on.

"At birth men are weak and soft; at death they are strong and rigid. Weak grass bends to the wind; the strong tree breaks. Such is the nature of wind, of grass, of a tree. You seek Tao to find it bent out of your path and gone. Tao is everywhere and nowhere; everything lives in pairs."

Again the sun was lower below the unseen ridge.

The priest said: "The smoke of this incense will be a thin dust tomorrow. Yet there would be no dust but for the incense. She who hanged herself here is dust. To the imaginative, her spirit still moves beneath that beam amidst the smoke which will be dust. She did not bend like the grass."

Ah Lai nodded. The wall in front of him was very hard to see.

The priest went on: "If Tao teaches, it teaches thus. If a lesson is learned, it is learned thus. In the old books we are told to *cut and then polish*, but by cutting and by polishing we destroy the nature of the thing upon which we work. Tao, if it speaks at all, would say: 'Relax; offer no resistance; do not allow the happenings of this world to rouse you into that consciousness which, truly, is the death of being . . .'"

Ah Lai nodded twice and sat up with a jerk. The cloying scent of the incense was in his nose and the room was quite dark. He waited for what he thought was too long and then rose to his feet. Feeling his way round the wall he came to where the priest had sat; past the next corner he could hear Winter Cherry breathing evenly and long. He tiptoed out, closing the door behind him and almost fell over the priest, who was sitting just outside the door.

The priest whispered as he steadied Ah Lai: "Come, my nose tells me that someone is cooking something. The girl will not overbalance. What did you dream about?"

"Nothing," Ah Lai replied, and they moved together through the dark passage towards a glimmer, the sound of stilled voices and the smell of cooking.

* * *

"It is good," Father Peng said when they were seated, "to see my family thus at the one table. A ceremonial separation of sexes and of

ages may be appropriate to ceremonial occasions, but there are times when it cheers my heart to see three generations thus doing all the same thing for the same purpose. That we have as guests here my young supplier-of-last-lines and his friend, the Guardian of the Hidden Spring, alters my opinion not at all. As to the last, may I ask him, while we await the first course of our meal, to make a few suitable remarks? That his Hidden Spring is at least the Hidden Spring of Literature, no one can doubt who has heard him quote the great writers of the past with the same facility as he will, I trust, show with his chopsticks."

The priest said: "On one occasion when Confucius was reproached by his disciples for saying nothing which they could record for posterity, he is said to have replied: *'Does Heaven speak? The four seasons succeed each other: generations succeed each other. But does Heaven need to speak about this?'* Yet I would venture to comment on what I have just heard. *'It is good,'* you said, Sir, *'to see my family thus at the one table.'* There is, however, one of the family which is not seated here with us. Do I not hear her steps outside the door?"

Winter Cherry came in and went to the vacant seat between her mother and Mei.

The priest went on: "After a good and dreamless sleep, however short that sleep may have been, the appetite should be restored. Ah, here is the first course! Are you amazed that I, whose fellows are supposed to take their nourishment from herbs and roots, should gladly contemplate this thick broth whose purpose is to show that the edge of hunger cannot be thus easily blunted? Do not suffer surprise, for food drains the blood from the head and leaves it the clearer. Let the girl serve the broth to us." As Winter Cherry did so, serving them in the correct order, he went on: "My young friend, you have a poem which you hoped, happily, to deliver yourself. Give it to me."

Ah Lai took from his pocket the poem which he had written at Sui-yang, and handed it to the priest. Winter Cherry hesitated between the bowls of Mei and Mooi-tsai. Some of the broth fell on the table. She recovered and filled her own bowl last.

When she had sat down, the priest read the even lines of the poem.

*There are no cicadas in winter.
The distant sentries speak in frosty tones.
There, beyond that sun, the Emperor mourns;
I do not look towards the departing sun;
Chang-an lies beyond the reddened peaks;
Behind me the setting sun is red, red.
A bird flies past me into the sunset.
Only the hill-tips glow like a memory.
The yamen water-clock seems to hesitate.
All the hill-breasts are shadowed.
The day has yet to come.
But the miles do not alter in the darkness.
Only the sky is red behind me.*

Read thus, the poem hangs together, as a good poem should. Girl, since the poem was addressed to you, read me the odd lines."

When the priest had given her the paper, Winter Cherry read, in a clear voice as if she did not know what words she was reading:

*Behind me the setting sun is red, red.
The watchman beats his cracked gong:
Behind me the setting sun is red, red.
Before me the tips of the hills redden.
My thoughts are not with the Son of Heaven.
You lie forever beyond my reach.
A soldier comes to ask about provisions;
The breasts of the hills are brown now;
My brush on the paper moves slowly;
Half the sunlight has gone,
Night creeps between us;
Behind me the setting sun. . .*

Then she stopped at the word and broke into noiseless sobbing, her face in her hands on the table before her. The Lady of the Tapestry made as if to comfort her, but the priest interrupted quickly: "Leave her alone. Girl, there are but two words remaining

to scan the rhythm—two words and one more line. Read those two words and that one line.”

Winter Cherry looked up, then buried her head again in her hands.

The priest repeated: “Read.”

Everyone had stopped eating.

Winter Cherry said: “I cannot.”

The priest said: “*Behind me . . .*”

Then Winter Cherry cleared her throat and cried: “It was a red veil of blood, with the sword rising and falling between me and the blood, and a gong beating in time with my heart.”

“The gong was your heart,” the priest said. “Now read the two lines.”

Winter Cherry read:

Behind me the setting sun is blood, blood.

“And the other line,” the priest repeated.

Winter Cherry read:

Only the sky is red behind me.

Father Peng observed: “If I may venture to offer an opinion, I should say that the poem seems rather more highly-coloured than is customary.”

Peng Yeh asked: “Will she have recovered?”

The priest replied: “Sir, she had nothing from which to recover. Her mind was clouded, perhaps: she suffered from a misapprehension of the nature of man. But now she sees clearly. Eat, child: here are bean-sprouts. A simple dish, but one calculated to introduce others. A misapprehension of the nature of man.” He addressed Father Peng. “Will you, sir, or shall I tell the story of the squirrel, the cat, the hog and the woodman? It will serve to make my point clearer.”

Father Peng waved the suggestion aside.

“I am sure that I should not bring out quite the shade of instruction which is in your mind,” he said.

The priest helped himself to bean-sprouts from the dish in the middle of the table, added sauce, stirred the sprouts with his chopsticks, took a trial mouthful, and began: “A certain squirrel, when

the weather was cold and snow threatened, remembered a store of nuts which she (for it was a female squirrel) had hidden in a dis-used rat-hole in a rock face. When she reached the place she found that the entrance to her larder had been blocked by a piece of rock washed into it by the rain, a piece of rock too large for her to be able to move. The first flakes of snow fell, and the squirrel looked round for assistance.

"A cat was passing, and to her the squirrel addressed herself: 'If you, oh cat, would help me with removing this stone from my store (and the feat is well within your strength) I would gladly repay you with one part in ten of my nuts.'

"The cat replied, scornfully: 'I do not eat nuts. I eat squirrels, so be off with you.'

"Then the squirrel asked help of a hog who was rooting nearby. 'If you, oh hog,' she said, 'would help me to remove a stone from the door of my store of nuts, I would gladly give you two parts in ten of my nuts.'

"The hog said, eagerly: 'Nuts? Where?' So the squirrel did not ask for further help from the hog.

"Then the squirrel went to a man who was felling a tree nearby and said: 'If you will help me to move a stone from the entrance to my store, I will gladly give you up to five parts in ten of my nuts.' The woodman put down his axe at once, and went to help the squirrel, and when he had moved the stone and the squirrel had thanked him and was about to enter, he seized the squirrel by the tail, wrung her neck and skinned her on the spot so that the skin could dry a little before he stretched it on a board before curing it. Then he put the skin down, spat on his hands, picked up his axe and went on felling the tree."

He attacked his bean-sprouts again.

Mei said: "I think that the story is cruel."

Mooi-tsai said: "Whoever heard of a talking squirrel?"

Winter Cherry said: "Yes. It is the nature of man to skin squirrels. I see."

Ah Lai put in: "Not all woodmen would behave thus. Besides, it takes many a squirrel-skin to make a coat. He would have ob-

tained the same result for less labour by killing the hog and tanning its hide."

"That is a fair defence, so far as it went," Father Peng said. "But I am glad, for the girl's sake, that you did not pursue the metaphor of the squirrel and its skin too far. She is possibly sore at that point."

Winter Cherry pretended not to hear this, though Mooi-tsai had to hold the bean-sprouts in her mouth with her chopsticks.

"Little one," the priest told her, "your turn will come."

Later, when they had eaten duck with pear-juice, fish fresh from the Wei boiled with chicken-broth, and cakes studded with white peel, Ah Lai, going out for fresh air, saw Winter Cherry following him to the door. He did not stop, as he had intended, but went on towards the summerhouse. Here, after a little, Winter Cherry joined him.

Ah Lai said: "Do you realise that I had hardly the opportunity to speak a single word? It seems to me sometimes that we pay too much deference to age and volubility."

Winter Cherry answered: "But you did not wish to speak. And the poem was yours. I do not see that you have just cause for complaint."

They sat down. Ah Lai went on: "Even your father was silent. I can only imagine what it must have been like in the old days, when this prerogative of the old was more fully observed, when you and I should never have been given the chance of speaking thus, together, in the surrounding darkness."

She, too, went on with what she had been saying before: "It does not matter if one is silent when one has nothing to say. I feel empty and clean."

"*Does Heaven talk about it?*" he quoted. "But it is natural that you should have no urgent desire to speak, for you have suffered much, and after suffering the mind is silent in recovering."

"It does not seem now as if I had suffered anything," she said. "I feel as I felt before I went to the Palace, the first time. Do you think it right that a girl should have thoughts like mine? Before, it would be a girl's duty only to cause no anxiety to her parents."

"Of course you should think for yourself," he answered. "Of

what use is the mind if it is only a reflection of one's parents? That way, man would never advance. And I cannot avoid feeling that now, with death so near, with death passing by this place and passing on, we cannot remain what we were."

Winter Cherry said: "A man should share his thoughts."

"With whom?" Ah Lai asked. "If you share them with these old men they put your thoughts out on a table and stick pins in them. Look at my poem."

"It was a very good poem," she replied. "And it was very useful to your friend the priest. I still do not know why I was silent, why I did not seem to be alive, why I did not want to be alive, until he spoke to us both in the growing darkness of the room where Kuei-fei hanged herself, and why speech and living poured back into me when he made me say the word which I feared."

Ah Lai said: "We are mysterious, even to ourselves. Yes, the priest is a good man. He knows about minds. I wish I could take him with me to Chang-an, where I must go tomorrow on the Emperor's business. He would be able readily to distinguish between the wise course and the foolish course in those decisions which all those in the Emperor's service are compelled to take during their duties."

"I shall talk with him again, if he will allow me to do so," Winter Cherry said, ponderingly. "I feel that, if I tell him all that is in my mind, that mind will become even clearer. And yet I am afraid to see too clearly. It is as if a man were to become a bird and look down on the doings of men when they were not aware of the bird's presence overhead. People are different when they do not know that they are being watched. Then, they are more truly themselves. What have you done since I saw you last?"

And Ah Lai, in the darkness of the summerhouse, looked a little ashamed, not of what he had done since he went to Cheng-tu with the Emperor, but of what he had done before then. So, being a little wiser than might have been expected, he strove to give the impression that he would rather not talk about Cheng-tu. He knew that, if she found out from others what had happened there, she would find nothing to his discredit. As regarded the interlude with

Honeysuckle and the things that had happened on the road with Kuei-fei, he hoped that she would not enquire. He reserved the right to be himself, he reflected, but all the same it had been summer foolishness. Both of the women had known, much better than he, the precise way to get round a man.

Winter Cherry . . . now, was different. She might not understand.

So Ah Lai said that it was late and that he must sleep well before his business at the Capital tomorrow.

Winter Cherry was a little surprised at this, but also a little relieved at the deferment. She followed him back to the buildings and sought to find the priest.

* * *

The priest was apparently sleeping in the empty guest-room. When Winter Cherry entered he sat up and looked at her.

She said: "I wanted to ask if it is right for me to try to see clearly all that is in my mind. I am a little afraid of that."

The priest replied: "Not to see clearly is not to see at all. You cannot see through a rounded, white pebble in a river bed; though the light comes through it you cannot know what is on the other side of the pebble."

"But is it wise to see?" she asked. "It may be that at the other side of the pebble are things which we would rather not see."

"That is for you to decide for yourself," he said. "The boy is your pebble. Do you wish to turn it over?"

"I do not know," she said. "I am afraid of what I might find. Yet you have shown me how, by facing my own fears, they may be conquered. Do I wish to face all my fears?"

The priest rubbed his stomach. "As food is not food until a man eats it, so a fear is not a fear until it is experienced. You remember the Master's words? I mean, of course, Lao Tze, who knew Tao. He said: *'A window may supply the scenery to fill an empty room, Yet the scenery is not in the room. Hear and see, if you like, but shut out wisdom from the mind.'* You are afraid of being afraid. Open your eyes and your ears, but do not think of what you expect to see or hear. Accept it. Does the boy offer marriage? Has he for-

gotten all the old formalities about go-betweens and parental arrangements? Then he has forgotten them. That is what you see and hear. Accept it."

"He has not yet offered marriage," she said. "His is a very famous family, and famous families observe the conventions."

"You resemble your very capable mother," he replied. "She is well-gone with child, yet she strives to conceal it by loose clothing, by unchanged behaviour. Is she trying to conceal it from herself? You, girl, know what is in the boy's mind, yet you strive to convince yourself that it is proper to await a formal declaration or the visit of a go-between. You know the boy's mind. Show him that you know it. Now I shall go to sleep again, for this is no problem at all."

He turned his back on her.

But when Winter Cherry had gone to her room, she found she could not sleep. Somehow she had not said either to Ah Lai or to the priest any of the things which she had intended to say, and although she closed her eyes her imagination drew pictures which she did not wish to dispel. She knew that, in her fresh found clarity of thinking, her mind was playing with thoughts which should not be played with by an unmarried girl until all formalities have been completed and, in a closed and stuffy carrying chair, she is being borne swiftly towards her husband's threshold.

What was it that the Lady Yang had said, when she and the Emperor had made their secret, solemn pledge?

She rose from her bed, lit the lamp and took writing materials.

She wrote: "*On the night of the Double Seven, in the Palace darkness, they were to be two, mating, one-winged swallows—two limbs of a single tree.*" This is what the Lady Yang Kuei-fei told me about herself and the Emperor. Do you think that I ought to wish for a pledge like this?"

She folded up the paper, carried it to the priest's room and, tip-toeing silently in, put it where he would be sure to find it near his hand. Then she went back to her room, blew out the light, got into bed and was instantly asleep.

* * *

On the twenty-third day of the tenth moon, in the city of Chang-an, Ah Lai stood on the outskirts of the crowd to watch Su Tsung, the late Heir Apparent and now, by his own edict, Emperor, enter amidst a thousand shouts. Ah Lai, as he watched, was thinking of the Bright Emperor, Su Tsung's father, whom the boy had last seen in Cheng-tu. He thought of the Bright Emperor's self-condemnatory proclamation promising to hand over the Dragon Throne to his son. He compared the present Emperor's behaviour with the dignity of the old man in Cheng-tu, deciding in consequence that he was himself becoming old-fashioned, conservative and a slave to ceremonial. He slipped away from the edge of the crowd and went to visit Wang Wei, who was next on his list of those officials present in the Capital during the rebels' period of power, into whose conduct he had been commissioned to enquire very informally and with a particular care to avoid any suspicion that the Bright Emperor (and so his son) wished to have preliminary information before a formal, official enquiry was opened into their conduct. As he went, he regretted, in a way, that he was compelled to send in a card with only his name and family upon it, instead of the pleasantly grandiloquent title which he might have been able to give himself of Enquirer into Activities of Officials during Rebellion.

Wang Wei was living in a small house in Gate Street. When Ah Lai had sent in his card, the servant returned almost at once with Wang Wei ten paces behind him. Paying scrupulous attention to the old ceremonial of greeting, each went backwards eight paces and then came forward again with repeated bows. Wang Wei led backwards into the room beyond, motioned to a seat which the servant brought up and managed with success the difficult business of sitting down at precisely the same moment as Ah Lai without giving to his actions any appearance of lack of spontaneity.

And still Wang Wei had not spoken a word.

Ah Lai waited for his host to speak, waited indeed for a period greater than the most exact courtesy could prescribe. He was at a loss to account for this seemingly chilly reception.

Finally he said: "I trust that you are in the best of health. I have

just come from watching the new Emperor pass towards his Palace."

Wang Wei touched a small gong beside him. Another servant came in bearing writing materials and a small table.

Wang Wei wrote: *My heart is fuller of joy than are the thousand hearts of the people of a hundred surnames who greet his Majesty.*

Ah Lai, puzzled, read the paper and said: "Your brush has lost none of its skill, your characters none of their beauty and your sentiments none of their wisdom. If you will pardon the enquiry of one who is too young to know better, is it your meaning that joy can be too deep for spoken words?"

Wang Wei motioned for the paper and wrote with flying brush: *I could not serve the rebels. When they brought me here against my will I drank a medicine which removes the power of speech.*

Ah Lai read this and asked: "Will the power return? It would save effort if you would signal with your hands. I will try to make my questions such that an answer may be one word."

Wang Wei signed: *Yes.*

Ah Lai felt himself more awkward than he cared to admit. His dutiful enquiry was plainly answered already. But courtesy could not have permitted his departure after so short though so embarrassing a conversation. He told Wang Wei what he could remember of the new Emperor's arrival, followed it with a sketch of the happenings when An Lu-shan and An Ching-hsu had gone to the farm at Ma Wei, and the manner in which Winter Cherry had been treated.

Wang Wei wrote: *I remember her at the party: a pleasant girl. Honeysuckle was here yesterday. You should go and see her.*

Ah Lai managed to round off his visit with compliments which did not call for a wordy reply and finally, concealing his relief, bowed himself out backwards.

In the street he heaved a sigh and went back through one of the side streets in the direction of the focus of excitement. On his way there, he happened to look up and saw the face of Clear Rain round an open door. She beckoned him in.

* * *

They were sitting side by side on a low stool at the end of the room when he got in. Clear Rain had her little *cheng* on another stool in front of her and was idly running the tiny bamboo hammers over the strings.

Clear Rain said: "We were preparing for an entertainment at which we shall be present tomorrow. It is very difficult to remember all the songs which a girl is supposed to know."

Ah Lai replied: "I was passing when I happened to see you. But do not let me interrupt your practice. What was the name of the song?"

Honeysuckle said, smiling: "Gathering Water-Lilies."

Clear Rain struck the first notes of the song.

Ah Lai interrupted: "On further thought, I doubt if I really have the time, though I should very much have liked to have heard you again. My real purpose in calling (though it might have been a day or two later had I not seen you) was to thank you not only for having so far disturbed yourselves as to pass on the letter which I sent to Winter Cherry but also to thank you for having acted as you did when she was brought here."

Honeysuckle observed: "It was fortunate from that point of view that you had written the address of our house on the back of the poem, although, if our friend Winter Cherry exercised her mind at all, she could not but find curious the reference in the note beneath the address to the fact that you could not think of her without thinking of water-lilies."

Ah Lai replied: "I think that your suggestion when I came in, that you were practising the song which is called 'Water-Lilies' was rather more tactful than this second, more direct reference to those plants."

Clear Rain said: "I must go and see Mother Feng about food." She rose to her feet, put aside the *cheng*, and went out.

Honeysuckle said quietly: "There is no sense in being frightened of the title of a song. Besides, I find that my memory is getting worse and worse, so that I cannot possibly imagine why the title of the song or the writing on the back of the poem should make you change your face and look as though there were some secret

between us. Remember that Clear Rain knows nothing of that secret. Remember also that my memory is bad. Now, tell me the news."

Ah Lai spoke of Winter Cherry's recovery, of the priest, of Father Peng and his interest in the fighting and lastly of the expected arrival of a brother for Winter Cherry.

"It might be a sister," Honeysuckle told him. "But that would indeed be disappointing."

Ah Lai said: "The Bright Emperor is coming from Cheng-tu on his way to the Capital and will stop at the Peng's house for one night. He told me to make arrangements. It seems that he wishes to see the place where she died. I shall have to reach Ma Wei before the Emperor arrives."

"He wants to remember the Lady Yang?" Honeysuckle asked. "Yes, that is like a man. They miss us, afterwards."

Clear Rain returned, not with food but with three small cups of wine which she brought and set on a small table beside them. "Do you think," she asked, "that we might come to the farm again one day? You will realise why when you see me raise my cup, so, and drink to Horses!"

Honeysuckle said: "That soreness, like sorenesses of a different sort, passes rapidly. For my part I drink to my poor memory."

Ah Lai rose to his feet. "And I," he said, "beg your permission to drink to both of you. I shall certainly do all that is in my power to have an invitation sent to you."

They both rose and accompanied him to the doorway.

Ah Lai did not feel that he wished to do any more of the Emperor's work that day, nor did he find it possible to endure the thought of watching the unique ceremonies whose echoes still crept round the corner of the street as he heard the door shut behind him. He walked rapidly towards the house where he was lodging, thinking against his will of the flat, slowly heaving plates of water-lilies.

* * *

Han Im came first. He seemed thinner than when Peng Yeh had

seen him last. He did not accept Peng Yeh's offer to sit down but said: "You will forgive me, sir, if I seem brusque and come to my point at once. The Emperor has been pleased to allow me a few days of leisure from my military duties, and I wish, before the near impending arrival of His Majesty to pay my respects to your honourable father, so that he may be not too much incommoded by the ceremonies of Imperial arrival when I greet him."

Peng Yeh bowed, passed rapid instructions for last minute preparations to Lo Chin, who stood near the door, and bowed them both towards Father Peng's room. Then he went away and left them.

The old man strained his eyes and came forward.

Han Im unbuckled the sword from his waist, and held it out towards the old man.

"It has served well," he said, "and no thanks of mine could be adequate. Shall I put it where it always ought to be?" Without waiting for an answer he tied the straps together and hung the sword on the wall.

Father Peng said: "I am glad that it has been of service to you both. I need hardly say that I have missed it. When the rebels came here my hand itched for the scabbard, but I was helpless. You have heard that they killed my grandson?"

Han Im bowed his head. "No news has reached me," he replied, "I, of all, am qualified to understand the sorrow which you have not spoken, and to offer the sympathy which is of no avail. I think that you will understand me when I say that your granddaughter, Winter Cherry, brought sorrow to my own heart more often than she knew, when she told me that my face seemed to her like her father's face. And I, poor fool, had then to look at her and make her feel comfort when it was really I whose claim for comfort was the greater."

Father Peng replied: "To such a sorrow there is no answer; for such a loss there is no recompense."

They stood without speaking for more than a little while and then Father Peng performed the courtesy of stools.

"My daughter-in-law," he said, "is in a position to save me

from this great ill. But I am not a magician; I cannot, by divining the cracks on a tortoise shell, know whether my tomb will lastly go untended."

"Let us hope," Han Im returned. "Now I must go and stand in the gate, for I was only a little in front of the Emperor. It would be gracious of you, sir, and in consonance with the accepted tradition if you would accompany me to that gate."

Father Peng replied: "Yes. I will put on my robes of ceremonial greeting. Help me."

They went out together and stood in front of the great central doors which could only be opened on an occasion such as this.

The Bright Emperor came first, alone, on foot. Behind him two men carried a large sandal-wood box, strung from a pole which they bore on their shoulders.

Father Peng and Han Im kotowed. The Emperor stopped them.

"Once is enough," he said. "Later you will know why. Han Im, tell the bearers to take the box to the gate, set it down and return. They all have their orders."

Father Peng seemed disappointed, looking along the path by which the Emperor had come. The bearers had set down the box and gone back.

"No," the Emperor told him, "there are no others coming. Today I come alone. Han Im, go in and see that I am taken, unmet, to the room which I occupied when I was last here." He turned back to Father Peng. "Sir, if you will, come with me."

Father Peng, puzzled, followed. He did not seem able to understand why the Bright Emperor's commands were couched as requests. Han Im was waiting for them.

"I trust that all has gone well, Sire," Father Peng said, doubtfully.

"As well as may be," the Emperor returned. They entered the room where he had last stayed. "Now I will try to solve the riddle which is perplexing your mind. Let us open this box. You see, it contains on the top the clothes which might be worn by any educated man, and here is a scholar's cap. I remove these trappings, so—help me, Han Im—and replace them by a scholar's garments, thus. I have a right to wear the scholar's cap, for I also have written

poetry. So. You see before you not the Emperor but the Scholar of the Stream. Forget all but that. The reason, as your raised eyebrow demands? It is this. Let us sit down first. Han Im, scholars talk best with tea. If you could arrange it . . ."

While they waited, the Emperor looked round the room, remembering.

Then Han Im came back, followed by a servant with tea. Han Im sat down, too, and they all sipped.

"Not all my life," the Emperor said when he had set his cup down, "have I been able, as others have, to speak freely to men who did not fear me. Now I can do so. Tomorrow I shall leave for the Capital. My son, Su Tsung, will meet me with joy. We shall greet each other. We shall go to the Palace and I shall mourn with him at the desecrated tablets in the Hall of Ancestors. Then I shall give him my great seal—I have it here, in the box—and retire to my other palace, the Palace of Felicity. He will beg me to retain my throne. I shall tell him that I am an old man, and tired. I shall beg to be excused. Then I shall watch my declining years, until the grave provides the solution of all my difficulties. But now—I am the Scholar of the Stream for one day."

Han Im said: "I understand your mind. Indeed, I am the only one of those about you who has understood your mind for a long while. Like you, sir, I have nothing to lose. Like you, I see left behind me little of good: I look to no productive future."

Father Peng seemed a little to have recovered his confidence. "As one scholar to another," he began, hesitated for expected wrath, and went on, "I begin to understand. For us, whose minds should be free, there must be also a time of balancing of accounts."

The Emperor observed: "Yes. My life has been like the life of the stream whose name I have taken for my one-day title. A stream starts with small beginnings, silver laughter over stones. Difficulties come—rougher places, mud banks—and the stream flows through a countryside where its direction is at the whim of forces which it does not understand. Men set banks to keep it in. Men take from the stream for their farms and rice fields. More and more sluggishly the stream struggles on towards the wide, calm sea where all memory of

it will be lost. I am that stream."

Han Im said: "Sir, before night falls and you listen in the stillness for footsteps which are not there, would it not be as well if you behaved as simple scholars should? Visiting a friend, thus, one goes first to greet the oldest. Then, with him, one visits the other members of the house. Were you an Emperor, your actions would not have to conform to these rules. As you are but a simple scholar, I would suggest that we visit the honourable Peng Yeh and his household. The boy Ah Lai, who came yesterday, has prepared them for your arrival. He is probably occupied with the girl. If you will see the others . . . By thus conforming, you will the better mould yourself to your chosen part."

"The fault," Father Peng said out of turn, "is mine. The suggestion should have come from me. If I may now make it . . . Drink up your tea, Sirs."

They finished the little cups and Father Peng led the way to the Great Hall.

* * *

Peng Yeh shook off Han Im's restraining hand and prostrated himself nine times.

"I am a simple man," he said when he had risen, "and I cannot play this game of make-believe. The nine prostrations which are due to you, Sir, are beyond your power to abrogate. I owe them, as we all owe them, to your rank and station, and no Scholar of the Stream can blind my eyes to who you are. Punish me if you will."

The Emperor said: "Alas, this is a mudbank to my stream. I have, in my life, understood the motives which moved scholars, officials, administrators. I have not been wholly ignorant of the minds of women. But it seems, as I have always suspected, that I knew nothing of the minds of the people of the hundred surnames. Peng Yeh, you have honoured me beyond my wish and you have confirmed the worst fears which I had of my own ignorance."

Peng Yeh replied: "Sire, I have done my duty. I regret that there are no more men of my family to greet. My wife is in her room surrounded by women. It seems as if her time were to come very soon.

My daughters are busy there. I would beg of you to accept my humble greeting as representing all that remains of my family."

Han Im said: "Sir, this is your own fault. So much of the courtesy of our land has rested on convention that the absence of convention prohibits courtesy." He chanted:

*But for the drums, the bells, the gongs,
Who would sing songs? Who'd sing?*

*Without the bells, the gongs, the drums
What player strums his string?*

*If dumb the gongs, the drums, the bells,
What portent tells the Spring?*

"You may speak of convention," Peng Yeh went on doggedly, "but I have been brought up to convention. I have been brought up to expect order and correctness. I plant seed, I watch it grow and ripen, I reap and thresh it. Nature is ordered: nature is conventional. So, if suddenly the ripe grain becomes green, or the grain-shoots shorten and disappear below the earth, I know that the nature of things has altered. So I cannot avoid behaving to you as I should behave to an Emperor. Such is my nature, as it is the nature of grass to grow and ripen."

Father Peng said: "My son, you do me little credit in thus comparing your conventions, which have been taught to you, and the growth of grain, which is natural to the grain. And yet I remember trying to impress the need for logic upon you. But, if you truly feel thus, it would be better for us to consider this greeting finished." He bowed, once, to his son. They all bowed once. Peng Yeh again prostrated himself, and they all went out, leaving him on his knees.

"I must apologise for my son," Father Peng said.

The Emperor replied: "He has shown us what you and I, scholars though we be, will never understand. Would it be possible to see my hostess? I expect your son exaggerates her condition. It is conventional to do so."

When they reached the women's rooms, the Lady of the Tapestry was sitting at her embroidery frame.

"You will have to forgive me, your Majesty, if I do not rise to my feet," she said. "Nature overrides monarchs."

"Now here is a realist," the Emperor said, as he stopped the girls from their kotows with a gesture. "Today I am but a simple scholar, Madam—the Scholar of the Stream—and I beg of you to consider that this call is a short one, not made in accordance with custom, but merely from curiosity and an expectation of a more reasonable attitude than that of your husband. Han Im, here I find no new thing. Madam, accept my hopes."

He led the way out and went back to his own room. Here he found the priest and Ah Lai, waiting for him. He dismissed Han Im and Father Peng, restrained Ah Lai and made him resume his seat, and addressed the priest, who was sitting on the floor.

"So you, at least, recognise that my appearance denotes a change," he said.

The priest replied: "What matters is the heart."

Ah Lai produced a list detailing the results of his activities amongst the officials in Chang-an who had worked for the rebels.

"Give it to Han Im," the Emperor said. "I expect that he is talking with the old man. Go now and see."

When they were alone, the priest repeated: "What matters is the heart."

The Emperor said: "I know. But my heart is torn and perplexed. I seek everywhere for some sign that her presence left its mark, and there is no sign. Instead of what I expected, I find a family who have few common thoughts with me, desperately polite, but concerned only with their own way of life. The old man, I know, desires me to write poems with him. Peng Yeh desires only my going and his consequent return to his usual business. The others . . . need I go on?"

The priest replied: "That is what I meant when I said *what matters is the heart*. Had you really changed, you would not now selfishly be seeking balm for what you think your own tragedy. You would be seeing the tragedies of others, and striving to lessen the effects of those tragedies. The old man—what have you done to ease his sense of frustration, of ineffectual going to a predestined

goal without its mattering greatly what he says or does in these, his last few days? Peng Yeh—what have you done to show him that, if no more, you know that the problems of the ordinary man exist, that to wrench a living from the reluctant earth is no problem-free, easy task? And the others, as you say? What have you done for them? Do you not think only of yourself?"

There was silence in the room. Outside, voices distantly, and the wind.

The Emperor said: "No—you are unfair. As a priest you are bound to believe that, after death, souls shall be reunited. It is for the peace of the soul of Yang Kuei-fei that I strive. I need reassurance that all her beauty has not passed wholly into dust, like the beauty of a tree, the beauty of a picture . . ."

"*You* need reassurance," the priest replied. "*You*. It is not she with whom you are concerned."

The Emperor countered: "Apply the argument to yourself. You have powers, but you will not use them. Do you remember in the Book of Poetry in the minor festal odes?

We are exhausted: the rites are ended.

The priest is able to know the mind of the Spirits.

He transmits a message to the Ruler.

You have the power, I say. You can cross the highest hills and mountains of the after-land; you can plumb the deepest depths. Take her my message and bring me hers back."

The priest smiled and said: "The rites are ended. What rites? Do you expect me to do what the old priests did without the payment of a sacrifice? The white bull, the black bull, wine and grain. . . . This is to take but part of the Ode and neglect the other part. Have you an answer to that?"

"Tell me what answer to give," the Emperor replied.

The priest said: "Ah, the heart is changing. No longer does your Imperial Majesty assume that all men are wrong because you are right. Instead, the Scholar of the Stream asks. Yes, I can give you the answer. It was given before by the great Chuang Tzu, and we priests believe that our Founder himself said it. This is that answer.

*Who praises the old, formal rulers now?
They split hairs—they counted grains of rice.
What profit had they?*

There stands your answer. Since, therefore, you have with your scholars' garments put on also the humility of a scholar, you shall not find yourself unrewarded. Now, go and please the old man. Busy yourself with small things. It is not on every day that he will share brushes with an Emperor."

The Emperor started on a phrase of thanks, but cut it short in the middle and went out to Father Peng's room.

* * *

"The dusk wind is rising," Father Peng said. "It gives an overtone to one's thoughts. I wonder how many poets have thought that thought before and not considered it worth writing down. Have you formed, as I have, the habit of putting down something on paper each day?"

The Emperor replied: "I have formed no habits; perhaps it would have been better for me if I had done so. Seeing oneself thus, in the mirror of one's own words, it might be possible to avoid some of the mistakes. But, if that is so, it is probable that I have interrupted you in the course of your work."

Father Peng said: "No, you have not interrupted me, for I have just finished. I was revising and, I hope, improving a poem which I wrote long ago, when I was a young official enjoying his first leave. I called it *Returning Home*."

"Might I be permitted to inspect it?" the Emperor asked, and the old man gave him a piece of paper.

He read:

Returning Home.

*I am come back to my cottage.
Sitting at my ease I watch my people
Going about their unchanging duties.
From chrysanthemum tea I take fresh strength.
To the remembered walls I make a vow not to travel.*

*The sun in the blue sky greets me happily:
My hearth is empty, but there is a pile of wood by the door:
My wife tells me the latest, unimportant news.
Going to the cupboard where paper, brush and ink are kept,
I begin these lines in praise of contentment.
Father Peng said: "I was very young then."*

The Emperor replied: "Yes. It is the poem of a young man with the added polish of experience. I see that you refer to your wife."

"She has been dead a long time," the old man answered.

They both sat silently for a little while, thinking. Then the Emperor continued: "Your poem bears the marks of being a true experience, truly rendered. I have seldom been so fortunate as to catch the moment upon the tip of my brush and then find the result so well worth preserving. In the atmosphere of official circles, you must know, we tend to greater fragility and less real content. I remember a little thing—though I cannot possibly say why I remember it—a little thing which I wrote presumably to record a temptation which I desired to experience. Since you have been good enough to show me yours . . ." He recited:

Lines.

*Between the millet and the rice
My road runs to the sea:
Between my duty and my heart
No compromise can be.*

*My heart, they say, is on my left
My duty on my right:
My road runs always to the sea
'Twixt duty and delight.*

After they had rolled it on their tongues, he continued: "A whimsy, you see, possessing form but no content."

The old man smiled and rose to his feet. "What you have just suggested," he said, "about form without content makes me realise that the sun sets early in this month and that, while we both still have some claim to *form*, the evening meal is not for another good

hour, and that, being hungry, I am not content to lack content. This is the time, I think, to reveal to you that my literary store has other uses." From the box he took out wine and cups. "A rather special one," he said.

They settled down to a period of appreciation, and each managed to remember a number of other poems.

Outside, the dusk wind grew, unnoticed, and the wind beneath the door carried cold.

* * *

It was during the hour of the ox, when sick men die most easily because they do not regret their ebbing strength, that this wind rose to a high peak, unaccompanied by rain or snow or sleet or any manifestation of the other powers, raging recklessly past walls and doors, round courtyards and over the black, invisible fields, not seeming a destroyer but an angry force demanding entrance, demanding that men should come forth from their snug shelter and join in the eddying dance of the wind.

The priest woke in the darkness and heard the sobbing of Winter Cherry from the floor near the door.

"And now what moves you, girl?" he asked, when he had lit the lamp.

She cried, softly: "He did not speak."

The priest replied: "Listen to the winds. There are two winds, just as there are the two principles of Ying and Yang. So there are two sorts of people—men and women. Just as the winds meet, just as the Ying meets the Yang, so people meet. All will be well. Come; I will take you to your room."

She said: "I do not know even if he loves me."

"You will see," he answered. In her room she paused a moment and then said: "I still remember her, when I last saw her and she was sorry for me. And when she died she left one of her hair-combs, kingfisher combs, in the room where she hanged herself. I have kept it."

"Give it to me," the priest told her, and she obeyed. "Why! it is broken in two halves. She knew, then, that death would part her

from her lover. I am glad that you have told me all your troubles. Tomorrow you shall have your Ah Lai. Now sleep."

He left the room and went back to his own. On his way, he saw Han Im about to enter the room of the Emperor. From within came the Emperor's voice, calling. Han Im shrugged his shoulders and they went in together.

"Let the lamp be lit," the Emperor cried. "Let more lamps be brought. I cannot sleep, and I am afraid. Call the girl Winter Cherry so that I may not be alone."

The priest sat down on the floor. "When at the Great Sacrifice, you ploughed your ceremonial furrow, did you turn or stop half way?" he asked.

The Emperor cried: "You are impertinent. I . . ."

The priest interrupted him. "A thing either is or is not," he replied. "If you are the Emperor, I shall leave you. If you are yet the Scholar of the Stream, I could stay."

Han Im lit the lamp and was going back to stand beside the door when the priest said: "Put it out. It is for him to learn that thought in the darkness is wiser than thought by lamplight. Wu Ti did not thus call for lights."

"What of Wu Ti?" the Emperor asked.

The priest said: "Han Im, tell him the story. He should know it already."

Han Im blew out the lamp and said: "If it is your will, Sire . . ."

The priest cried: "It is not his will but my will. Tell him the story."

Han Im began: "When Li Fu-Yen, the mistress of the Emperor Wu Ti, died, he sent for magicians to bring her spirit back, and one magician, Shao Weng, did bring her spirit to him so that, seated behind a curtain, he was permitted to see his beloved. Do you not remember, Sire, how he cried:

*I stand watching, uncertain, uncertain;
A silken skirt hisses, Must she come so slowly?"*

The Emperor said: "I remember."

The priest went on: "It would be strange if, here in this dark, another priest should follow a little in the footsteps of Shao Weng."

The Emperor asked: "Could you do that?"

The priest replied: "With Tao it is possible. But what matters is the heart. The Emperor Wu Ti forgot that he was an Emperor and resigned himself to the will of Shao Weng. He made his mind empty, and the fullness of the Infinite poured in. He asked permission to go beyond the curtain, where her figure walked, but because this permission was not given to him he did not go. Such was the character of Wu Ti."

The Emperor said: "To make the mind empty is to be like a child. And yet, to have the reason for making the mind empty, one must have passed through childhood. How can you reconcile these two?"

The priest told him: "Because you have asked, by that you have emptied your mind. Therein you have done what is necessary. But there is more yet."

"What?" asked the Emperor.

The priest replied: "When you first mounted the Dragon Throne you did much good to your people. You forbade extravagance, you established houses for the study of literature and the training of performers in plays. You founded the Han-Lin Academy, where scholars study before they are allowed to govern. And then, for ten years, you have passed these things by and thought only of yourself and your lady. By what of these actions would you choose to be remembered when, in the unthinkable future, historians shall allow one line to your reign?"

The Emperor replied: "I had rather be known for the Academy."

The priest returned: "Good. But yet, in these last ten years, there have been many whom you have wronged. Would you right those wrongs now?"

For the first time the Emperor's voice seemed softer. It was almost as though he took pleasure from what he said as he uttered the single word: "Yes."

The priest said: "If the Scholar of the Stream would write an edict to say that he renounces all his claims on the girl Winter Cherry and gives her (all laws, customs and conventions notwithstanding) to the boy, Kuen Ah Lai, who loves her and is loved by

her, and if the Scholar of the Stream would affix the Emperor's sign-manual at the foot of the paper, one wrong would have been righted."

Han Im asked: "Shall I light the lamp?"

The Emperor replied: "No. It is not needed now. The fear has passed."

The priest said: "Han Im, it is not fitting that you should share this. Go and prepare a draft of the edict."

When Han Im had gone out, the priest lit incense at the bottom of a deep bowl, so that when their eyes again were accustomed to the darkness (for even the flicker of the tinder seemed bright) it was possible to see a faint glow from this bowl. Then he said: "It would be a strange tale if the Guardian of the Secret Spring were sent on an errand, and if he succeeded in that errand; it would be strange if, like Shao Weng, he searched the thousand hills and plumbed the thousand depths, if finally he found, in the Blessed Isles, tales of a fair lady who waited for reunion with her lord. It would be stranger still if having come to a palace in the clouds, he knocked and to him came the maid named Piece of Jade, who told him that her mistress, too, had waited news from across the barrier. And most miraculous of all would it be if this lady herself came to meet him with hair disordered by her sudden joy above her white forehead, her kingfisher pins awry in her haste, and gave him messages of love, saying that she also was waiting for their union, sending her lover half of her broken hair-comb for a token, and, for proof that she was she, telling of words which they spoke together at midnight in the palace garden when seven moons and seven days had passed, words that no other lips had spoken, words that no other ears had heard."

The high wind had dropped to little more than a rustle and the room was filled with the acrid, sweet smell of the incense. A voice called somewhere else in the building and then was silent.

The Emperor, tenseness in his voice, asked: "What were these words of recognition?"

The priest replied: "Would she not have said that they prayed to be like two one-winged birds, mating, or two limbs of the one tree?"

The Emperor cried: "These were our very words! So did we pledge each other on the day of the double seven. And the token?"

The priest replied: "A hand moves in the darkness upon the fur-lined rug. The fingers of this hand searching . . ." He turned his head towards the door and called: "Enter, and bring a lamp with you."

In the yellow, flickering wedge of light which advanced and widened as Han Im came in with the lamp, the Emperor's fingers closed upon the broken half of the comb.

"Leave me for a little," he said.

Han Im observed: "I have the edict here, with brush and ink."

The Emperor seized the brush and signed the paper. Han Im and the priest bowed once and went out.

The door shut.

The priest told Han Im: "Carry this to the boy's room, wake him and tell him to take it to his wife. My work is done. You are, I think, of all these here the nearest to knowing the brightness of Tao. But I shall not say: 'It would be good to meet again,' for Tao takes no cognisance of meetings, and in Tao desire *even for so small a thing* is dead."

He bowed to Han Im and went to his room.

* * *

When Ah Lai, carrying a black case with all his belongings, went into Winter Cherry's room, she was fully dressed and the light was lit.

"I have just come from my mother," she told him. "Mei and I are sharing the watching. She is there now with one of the old servants. I was just about to sleep. But why are you here? You have much work to do tomorrow, and must sleep soundly in order to do it well."

He replied: "I have already slept a little. But I was awakened by Han Im. He gave me this." He handed her the Emperor's edict.

She read it and then looked up. "But how did he know about us?" she asked with wonder in her voice.

He said: "Such small matters as the ways of knowing of an

Emperor concern us not at all now. I do not know and it is certain that you cannot know either, so what is the use of asking, my wife?"

She replied: "You are quite right. And all the while I thought that you, even, did not know how I felt."

"Little Star," he cried, "I have felt so ever since I first saw you, trembling a little, in the Porcelain Pavilion. So has my heart been moved since first I heard you speak, since first I saw the sorrow in your eyes lessen at the sight of me, since first I learnt how useless fingers are for tasks which are new to them."

"It is easy to hear that you have been brought up in the company of poets," she told him, "for even those thoughts which I think you feel are neatly marshalled into epigrams and antithesis, so that they glitter with what I trust is not a too misleading brilliance."

"You, yourself, have been well educated," he replied, "The wind has dropped, but there is still a draught beneath the door. I shall put a mat, thus, in front of the crack, and set this chest upon it."

Winter Cherry hesitated. "But you cannot intend to stay here, with me, in my own room," she objected. "My parents would be angry and turn me out."

He took the Emperor's written edict from her hand and read out: "*All law, customs and conventions notwithstanding.* Your parents cannot be angry, with the Emperor's written words before them. Besides, you yourself said that your mother was not in a fit state to be troubled by such things. And your father?"

"My father," she replied, "sits on the edge of a stool, awaiting news. He would be a practical man, if we told him, and say that the birth of a son is a much more important matter than our marriage, and that our marriage can therefore await his impatience."

Ah Lai laughed. "But you, Little Star, do not think that anything could be more important than our marriage, do you? Besides, it is not for your father to say, since the wishes of the Emperor come first."

"You have latterly become a very conservative," she said. "Now that you have the Emperor on our side, you defer to the Emperor. Before, you used to say '*Who is the Emperor, that he should*

have you?"

Ah Lai returned: "Do not strive to make me too consistent. You would not like that. And if you go on talking it will soon be too late for us to sleep at all. Besides, you will not have the duty of explaining to your parents. Now that you are my wife, that duty devolves upon me, and I shall have no fear in telling them that you have had the good fortune to enter my distinguished family without the expensive ceremonies with which custom hinders the consummation of sense, and without endless discussions through commission-taking go-betweens regarding dowries, marriage settlements and other financial arrangements which matter not at all to us, standing here for the first time together without the need for dissimulation or subterfuge."

"That makes it very different," she agreed.

He went on: "Also, I would rather face your family with accomplished facts, for I believe that your father, at least, regards marriage as something lower than the friendship which one man has for another. Our more personal feelings are new-fashioned and fit ill with the general opinion of the times. That is all the more reason for telling your parents later, when there is no chance of their interposing difficulties. They are even capable of arguing about a thing so final as the Emperor's edict. And now, have I talked enough for us to go to bed?"

She said: "Yes. But give me that paper first. I must put it in a safe place in order that I may show it to my mother tomorrow. It would not be right to do otherwise." Then she smiled up at him and went on: "I am not afraid, now. I am glad that you have always felt like this."

He laughed: "Not always." Then he relented, and added: "Not before I met you at the Pavilion. That would have been too much to expect. Now, I believe that the things which husbands and wives usually say to each other begin: 'Do you remember' and so I ask if you remember how clumsy my fingers were when I buttoned your boy's clothes upon you. Do you?"

"Only too well," she replied, helping him.

* * *

Later, when the wind had died so that it no longer moved the piece of loose thatch on the wall by the gate, and it seemed that the line of the first light was breaking if anyone cared to look for it, there was a bustling and a hurrying in the rooms of the Lady of the Tapestry, and after a while a thin cry and then the sound of Peng Yeh's footsteps as he hastened round to his father's room and, breaking into dreams of ancient ceremonies cried: "It is a son!"

But neither these noises nor the padding of Father Peng's feet as, furred and waistcoated, he passed on his way to demand more certain proof, came into the consciousness either of the two who lay, clasped in each other's arms upon too narrow a bed, nor of the Emperor as he slept with peace in his face and both hands still grasping a broken comb.

But when it was just light enough to see the clear outlines of her window, Winter Cherry woke. She woke slowly, luxuriously, and without a question in her mind. How strange it was to greet the morning thus, not alone! How curious to know at once, instinctively, that she had now a duty to rouse her husband and set him on his business for the Emperor. He would need hot broth, and then something a little more filling. . . .

She shivered, wholly with delight, and moved Ah Lai's arm from her neck, laying it between them. He did not wake. She climbed out from under the rugs and skins and stepped carefully over his sleeping body to the floor. The embers in the narrow flue under their *k'ang* glowed still perceptibly, and she put a stick or two of fresh charcoal on the glow, fanning it a little, inaudibly, with her breath as she squatted on all fours by the bed.

She stood up and looked through the crack in the oiled paper window at the growing line of the horizon. The cool wind of dawn seemed to caress her skin: she ran her hands down from breast to hips with a tremulous delight. It was all his. There was certainty in her love. All the past was past and forgotten. She hoped her hair would soon grow to its proper length: she was sure her husband liked properly long hair. Just now it was neither one thing nor the other—a sort of mane which defied orderly treatment.

Ah Lai said: "I can see that I shall not need to leave my own house

for entertainment. No—no; you need not start so hurriedly to protect yourself against the chill of the morning. You did not do so until I spoke to you. It is absurdly early: come back here. Many a husband has wisely sent his wife back to her parents because she woke him too early. I am still quite sleepy. You have put some charcoal in the *k'ang*? Then come and keep me warm."

She protested: "But you have to be up early, to go on your duty. Oh! Do not look at me like that!"

He laughed: "Why not? But if you prefer it, you can have this fur rug and pretend to be a bear, and then I shall look at you differently. If you stay out there like that, you will be so cold that I shall not welcome you back here. Come. let us agree under more comfortable circumstances."

"Fetch me," she answered, and when he had done so and they were both warm again she said: "You are not in the least like what I expected."

He said: "Well, what did you expect? Were you judging me by a high standard, or a low? I did not marry you in order to be compared to someone else. A husband must be incomparable." He patted her. "There! I did not mean to be cruel. A life with a poet uncle has unfitted me for the more considerate sort of sincerity."

She snuggled down under the rugs. "I am defenceless now," she told him. "Before, I did not mind what people said to me, for the people themselves did not matter to me, But now you . . ."

"I," he said. "I matter very much. Listen, if you are not too busy. A girl once told me the tale of the man whose wife was too imaginative. Do you want to hear it, you there, under the rug?"

There was an affirmative movement.

He went on: "It happened in the winter, in the North, where the snow can be very thick and the cold very bitter. The husband had come in after his work and, when he had eaten the evening meal which his wife had cooked for him, they went to bed. Now she had prepared against the cold by making a larger fire than usual under their *k'ang*, and he was tired enough to go to sleep at once without noticing the added comfort. Since she followed him, she had no means of knowing what was happening, and soon slept also. In the

morning, when they woke . . . Are you listening?"

There was no reply. He, too, retired further under the rugs and shut his eyes. Outside the window the dawn climbed.

* * *

Dawn lit the swiftly moving clouds, dappled salmon and cinnamon. The Great Gate opened and the Emperor came out with Han Im. Two servants carried the box and set it down outside the gates. Then they went in and the main gates closed. Father Peng came out of the left hand, smaller gate, dressed in his last official robes, and waited. A carriage drove up along the outer wall and the driver, getting down, pulled the box up into it. The carriage turned and went back the way it had come, to the lower ground on the right which was not yet fully lit.

As the sun came up, its first rays touched the bright tip of the Dragon Banner which hung at its post in front of the cavalry on the left of the line. In the centre the infantry waited; on the right the archers, their bows of mulberry slung, reached out of the lower ground into the growing light.

The Emperor started walking up the slope. Han Im, following, wondered how many of the cavalry were the same men who, not long ago, had galloped in line across and across the ground in front of them, to which the Emperor was leading. How many remembered that day?

The Emperor walked on towards the spot.

So did times, seasons, and events repeat themselves. For, after all, life was but an endless repetition of the life of one's fathers, and historians, writing in the centuries to be, would not know what filled the thoughts of this man as he paced slowly towards the spot which had been for him almost the end of living.

"This was the place," Han Im said.

The Emperor stood motionless with lowered head.

Beside them other figures had come now, officials who had fled on that fatal morning with the Emperor and who now shared the Emperor's thoughts. Their eyes were wet.

Then the Emperor raised his head and looked at the ridge, where Han Im, too, could see the figure of the priest motionless against

the moving clouds. The Emperor bowed, looked once again at the ground, and said to Han Im: "Let us go."

The Emperor's carriage and those of the few who had stood with him came, halted, then wheeled back to their places in line. Han Im mounted the horse which had been brought for him. In the now level rays of the full sun the ranks broke into ordered movement down towards the road for Chang-an.

Han Im suddenly remembered what he had forgotten. He galloped down towards Father Peng, dismounted and bowed.

"It is the Emperor's command," he said, "that your grandson-in-law, Keun Ah Lai, be instructed to report at the Palace tomorrow, not today."

Father Peng bowed and replied: "It shall be as you say. The child is strong, like his father. He was feeding just before I came out."

They bowed again to each other and Han Im rejoined his company.

As the sun rose higher and lemon came to take the place of pink, and then that lemon turned to a misty white, Father Peng saw the last of the Emperor's force turn the corner and pass from sight.

He made the full nine-fold kotow, dusted his knees and went back through the gate.

THE END

*The tenth day of the first moon, new style.
Winderton.*

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